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BASEBALL PREVIEW 2026

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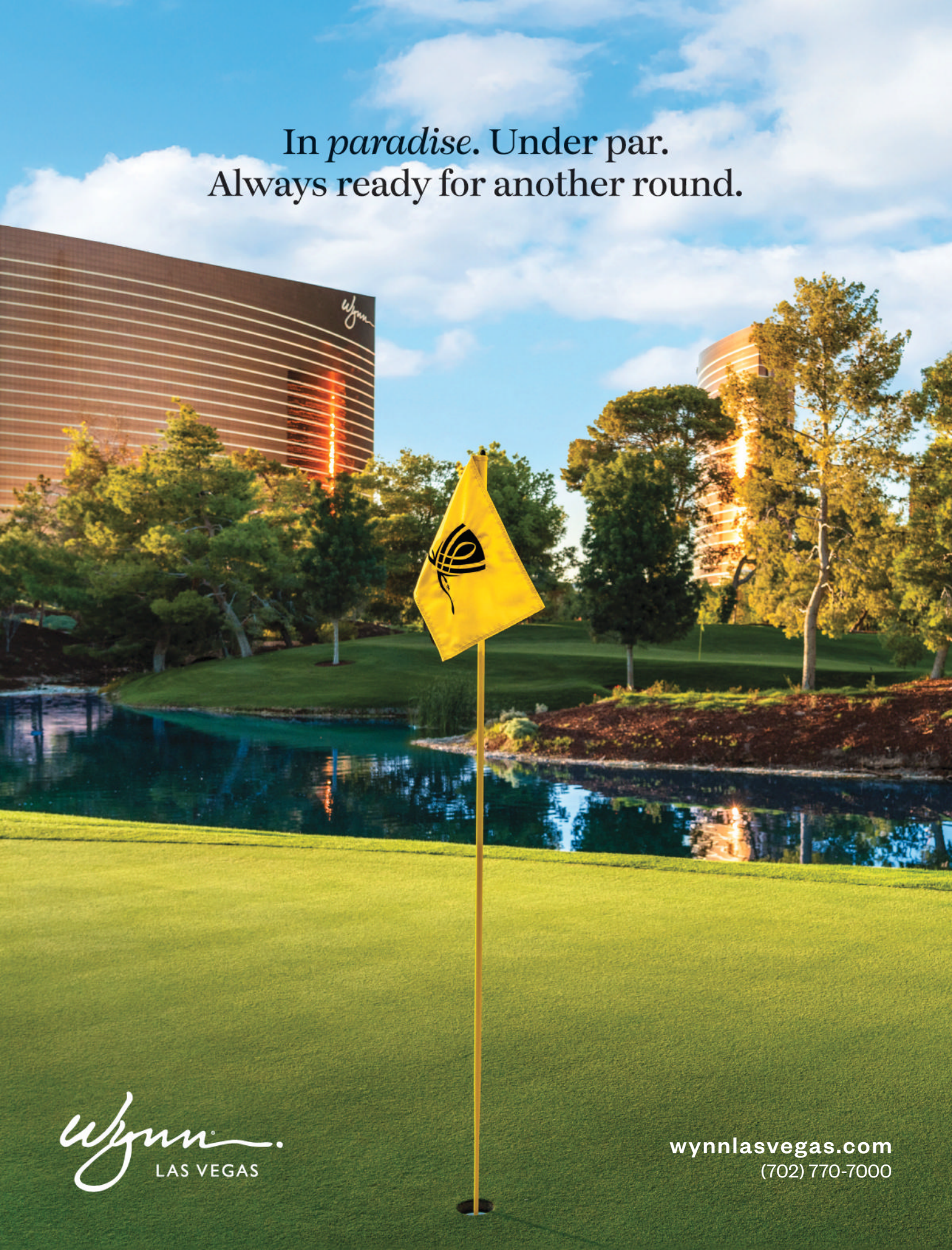
SHOHEI OHTANI and AARON JUDGE

Are Leading Baseball's New Golden Era

BY **TOM VERDUCCI**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BUC UP

Behind ace Paul Skenes, things are trending in the right direction in Pittsburgh, which is looking to end a 10-year postseason drought.

LINEUP

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SCORECARD

ESSAY

Hall Justice

THE PROCESS OF DETERMINING WHO GETS ENSHRINED IN CANTON IS FLAWED. HERE'S HOW TO FIX IT

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

BILL BELICHICK obviously should not have to wait to get into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, but at least he has company.

Like the six-time Super Bowl–winning head coach, Bill Walsh was not elected on the first ballot. Bill Parcells waited four years. But the problem goes far beyond coaches who should have sailed in. The entire selection process is a delay of game penalty.

Michael Strahan and Michael Irvin both had to wait. The last time a center was elected on the first ballot was 1987. No tight end made it in his first year until 2019.

When the NFL released its 100th anniversary all-time team in 2019, Alan Page, Mike Haynes, Dick "Night Train" Lane and John Mackey were all unanimous selections to the 100-player roster. None of them were elected to the Hall on the first ballot. Many other players on that all-time team should not have had to wait but did anyway.

Voters take the job seriously. But they are hamstrung by a system that limits the number of inductees per year—and places everybody except modern-era players (a pool that has its own restrictions) in the same bucket.

Former coaches like Belichick are judged alongside both "contributors" like his old boss Robert Kraft and players from the pool of senior candidates. Voters could only select three from that grouping—and so they were forced to choose between Belichick and other deserving candidates who have waited much longer. Belichick will clearly get in eventually, but for the others, this might have been their last shot.

That process needs to be fixed. But the *whole* process needs to be fixed.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (2)

Every year, modern-era player finalists are put on the ballot regardless of position. Each class of inductees is capped at five players. It's simplistic and silly. For an entity that exists to celebrate pro football, the Hall of Fame shows remarkably little understanding of it.

Pro football is a highly specialized sport. Lumping everybody together regardless of position is preposterous. This is not how recognition works in any other aspect of the sport. Imagine if the All-Pro team consisted of the 30 best players regardless of position.

The NBA's maximum-salary system is the same for point guards and centers, because both can be cornerstones. That would never work in the NFL. Nobody would ever claim that the best left guard is worth as much as the best quarterback. That is why the NFL's franchise tag is determined by the value of the highest salaries at each position.

PATS DOWN
Despite their credentials, Belichick (below) and Vinatieri (4) initially failed to sway voters.

Pro Football Hall of Fame voters are forced to begin the process from an illogical place. They have to spread the votes around the field—and that's a problem, because five votes per class is not enough.

The last 10 players elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame played, on average, 18 big league seasons. NFL players rarely come close to that. Even guys who seemed to play for a long time clock out relatively early. Hall of Famers Joe Thomas and Darrelle Revis each played 11 seasons. Ed Reed played 12. Calvin Johnson only played nine seasons.

Pro Football Hall of Fame voters have embraced players with high peaks but short careers. Tony Boselli started 90 games. Terrell Davis had four fantastic seasons, got injured and only played 17 more games. I'm not going to debate their candidacies here. But their elections serve to strengthen the case for other players with similar career arcs.

This is all compounded by the fact that football also has more positions than baseball. Every NFL team has 11 starters on offense and 11 on defense, plus a kicker, punter and returners. That means there are 25 positions that should have at least some representation in the Hall of Fame. Not equal representation. Some representation.

Baseball teams have 11 positions that deserve some representation: Nine everyday players (including designated hitter), starting pitcher and reliever. Now, pitchers obviously don't pitch in every game,

and some teams employ multiple pitchers who are performing at a Hall of Fame level. But football teams still have many more positions that should be represented in the Hall of Fame.

It makes sense for the Baseball Hall of Fame to place all players in the same pool. One can reasonably weigh the relative value of a second baseman and a center fielder. Comparing a right tackle to a cornerback is a lot harder—and comparing any quarterback to a non-quarterback is harder still. But the Hall of Fame asks voters to do it anyway.

So rather than simply vote for the most dominant players at each position in each era, Pro Football Hall of Fame voters have to manage the line: *One receiver at a time… this guy will obviously get in but we have five ahead of him… oops, we ignored this position entirely for a few years, gotta rectify that…*

This is how ridiculous it gets: When Cris Carter retired, he was No. 2 all-time in receptions and receiving touchdowns, and third in receiving yards. He was not elected to the Hall of Fame until his sixth year of eligibility. James Lofton retired as the NFL's all-time leader in receiving yards. When he became eligible for the Hall in 1999, he was not even a finalist. He was elected on his fifth ballot.

There can be sound reasons a Hall of Famer does not get in on the first ballot. Some cases are stronger than others; sometimes voters need time and context to come around. Sometimes the delay is a small punishment for an ethical or moral transgression, but those cases are pretty rare.

Mostly, players wait because the process is built to make them wait.

From 2006 to '20, there were 94 modern-era player finalists. Of those, 79 eventually made the Hall of Fame one way or another. What is the point of winnowing the list

CATCH-22
The Hall's illogical procedures slowed the candidacies of receivers Carter (left and below) and Lofton (bottom).

down if almost everybody on it will get elected eventually anyway?

Waits are not even the main problem. They are a symptom of a larger system failure. When obvious Hall of Famers like Strahan and Thurman Thomas have to go through the process multiple times, that means that less obvious but still deserving candidates never even receive proper consideration.

Kicker Adam Vinatieri was one of two kickers on the 100th anniversary team, but when he became eligible for the Hall last year, he was not elected. Vinatieri was a finalist, which is more than we can say for former Raiders punter Shane Lechler. Lechler made the 100th anniversary team and two all-decade teams. He was a first-team All-Pro six times. He became eligible for the Hall of Fame in 2023 and has never even been a semifinalist.

In terms of overall value to a team, Vinatieri, who got in earlier this year on his second try, and Lechler will never be among the five best candidates on a ballot. But Devin Hester wasn't, either. Hester was elected in 2024—ahead of six-time All-Pro Antonio Gates, among others—because he was probably the best kick returner ever.

It is time for the Hall of Fame voting process to reflect the game itself. Like this:

Separate ballots by position group

Let's make comparisons reasonable and group candidates like this: quarterback, offensive line, offensive skill positions, defense and special teams. This way, everybody has a path to the Hall, and Vinatieri does not have to compete against Drew Brees in the first place.

Clear-cut finalist guidelines

Advance the following players to finalist: one quarterback, one offensive lineman, two offensive skill players, four defensive players, one special teamer and three other players, regardless of position. That way, Brees and Eli Manning can both advance, or the Hall could finally address its glut of receiver candidates.

FOR THE MOST PART, PLAYERS WAIT BECAUSE THE PROCESS IS BUILT TO MAKE PEOPLE WAIT.

No more five-vote limits

For each finalist, allow voters to choose yea or nay. Trust them to take it seriously—because they already do.

Put coaches and contributors in their own categories—and remain flexible

Give voters some leeway there. That goes for the entire architecture I've laid out here—adjust the system as warranted over time. If voters start electing mediocre special teamers, that can be addressed.

Look, this is just one possible solution. It's not the only one, and it might not be the best one. But it would make a lot more sense than what the Hall does now. □

FROM LEFT: AL TIELEMANS; KIRBY LEE/IMAGN IMAGES; FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES

SCORECARD: GAMEPLAN

JACKET BOOK

ONE HALF OF MEN IN BLAZERS *IS BACK WITH A SERIES OF WORLD CUP REMINISCENCES*

BY MARK BECHTEL

WITH HIS thick Scouse accent, his deep love of Everton and a wry sense of humor, Roger Bennett seems quite the Englishman. His Wikipedia page notes, without citation but not without believability, that he is "fond of…tweed."

In reality, though, Bennett has been in the United States for more than 30 years, which provided the narrative thrust of first memoir, *(Re)Born in the USA*. His new book, *We Are the World (Cup)*, is built around his memories of each tournament, beginning with the 1978 edition.

It's a potentially dicey conceit; a book that relies heavily on four-plus decades of personal memories of watching sports, mostly on TV, can veer into *This again?* territory pretty quickly. But Bennett pulls it off with ease, for a few reasons.

SUPREME BEING
Ross was wide of the mark in a peculiar 1994 opening ceremony, but Bennett doesn't miss in his latest autobiographical tome.

Most significantly, he's as funny and observant on the page as he is on TV and podcasts as part of *Men in Blazers*. And the book is more than *Remember when?*. It traces the evolution of soccer in the U.S. from niche sport to something bigger. That's a theme that's been tackled many times before, but rarely by someone with Bennett's background and credentials: an already footy-mad Brit surrounded by indifferent Yanks.

His chapter on the 1994 World Cup is especially entertaining. The opening ceremony—held in Chicago, where Bennett happened to be living as a broke 23-year-old—featured Diana Ross scuffing a shot at a wide-open net in a show that also featured the likes of Daryl Hall and Jon Secada (with Oprah Winfrey as the emcee). "A clumsy piece of footballing choreography gone wrong amidst glamor and glitz, which felt like a cruel metaphor for all that was to come," he writes. Indeed, the sport didn't catch immediately. Bennett moved to Washington, D.C., where he describes watching games in bars with small crowds of ex-pats, including a mysterious diplomat who never removed the briefcase chained to his wrist, even has he ate with one hand and drank a pint with the other.

Later chapters touch on the author's perspective as part of MiB, the groundwork for which was laid on the day of the 2006 final, when he met his cohost, Michael Davies, as they commiserated over missing the game-deciding penalty shootout because they had been dragged to the same wedding on a boat circling Manhattan. The Cup, Bennett sweetly notes, "might just change your life." □

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SCORECARD: NEWSMAKERS

HARD LINER

THE NEW HEAD OF BASEBALL'S PLAYERS UNION IS NOT THE TYPE TO BACK DOWN

BY TOM VERDUCCI

BACK IN March 2024, Bruce Meyer, who was then the MLB Players Association deputy executive director, survived a palace coup. His defense strategy included a letter to players in which he left certain the hawkish reputation he earned in his long career in labor negotiations. Two years after a 99-day lockout ended in spring training of 2022 with an agreement between owners and players on a collective bargaining agreement, Meyer wrote that he sided with those players who had preferred shutting down the game rather than taking that deal.

"Some players emerged from bargaining disappointed that we did not accomplish more and in particular that we did not miss games to see if more [gains] could be made," Meyer's letter read. "To be clear, I sympathized and still do with these players and this position."

Before coming to the MLBPA from the NHL Players Association, Meyer—who notably walked the picket line in solidarity with striking members of the Writers Guild of America in 2023—had a distinguished career in sports labor law. That one paragraph best defines his approach. Even though two years had passed, he preferred missing games to see if more could be won at the table.

On Feb. 18, Meyer was named interim executive director of the MLBPA after the stunning resignation of Tony Clark. That he emerged more powerful than ever from the 2024 opposition is a testament to his experience and tenacity. Given Meyer's hindsight on the 2022 deal, not to mention his history with other leagues, one agent summed the change from Clark to Meyer this way: "The owners aren't happy."

Philosophically, nothing changes at the MLBPA bargaining table. Meyer has been its lead negotiator and will continue as such. The MLBPA maintains a deeply rooted opposition to a salary cap.

But two areas bear watching when it comes to possible differences with Meyer replacing Clark: The first is style. The second is strategy.

Meyer's elevation is the equivalent of a football defensive coordinator becoming head coach. The decision tree just grew scores of branches—such as, to borrow from the 2022 settlement, when to punt and when to go for it. It also places a greater responsibility on leadership and communication skills.

A union leader is a political leader, a kind of Speaker of the House. Solidarity is the backbone of union strength. The director is charged with creating a universally

MEYER'S ELEVATION IS LIKE A DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR BECOMING HEAD COACH.

WALKING THE LINE
A longtime labor lawyer, Meyer (with Clark, left) showed his commitment by picketing with striking writers.

supported consensus. Clark, while not necessarily dynamic, had the inherent advantage of being a former major league player. He spoke the players' language, knew their successes and felt their pain.

Meyer, more direct of manner, is a labor negotiator who never had to worry much about the "soft skills" of leadership, which was apparent in 2024 when some players and agents wanted him out. They wanted Clark to replace him with Harry Marino, a young lawyer and former minor league pitcher who brought minor leaguers under the union umbrella. Starting with his tour of camps this spring, Meyer had a chance to show players he has the chops to lead, not just dig in his heels at the bargaining table.

Building a universally supported consensus becomes more delicate as financial gaps widen among players, just as they do among teams. About 60% of players are paid at or near the minimum salary. Minor league reps hold 47% of the votes of the 72-member executive board. The average big league career is less than the six years of service required for free agency. One in five rookies never make it back for a second season.

A change in strategy from Clark to Meyer will not be clearly evident until we get closer to Dec. 1, when the current CBA expires. Meyer has said owners likely will follow that expiration with a lockout, as was the case in 2021. It ended March 10, 2022, leaving barely enough time to avoid losing games. (That season began a week later than scheduled and ended three days later, with the first week of scheduled games sprinkled throughout the year.)

The eight players on the executive subcommittee then felt as Meyer did about the last-ditch offer: They voted 8–0 against accepting the deal. It stood as a recommendation to the union at large to reject it. But after team representatives met with their teammates about the proposal, the players repudiated leadership and voted 26–4 to accept it. The only teams that rejected it (the Yankees, Mets, Astros and Cardinals) had a player on the subcommittee.

Commissioner Rob Manfred was pragmatic in explaining why it took so long to get an agreement: "Time and economic leverage. No agreement comes together before those two things play out."

Most players did not wish to risk losing paychecks to try for more bargaining gains, such as greater bumps in the luxury tax thresholds.

What could be different about the same scenario with Meyer, as opposed to Clark, wearing the headset and calling the plays? One agent said he expects Meyer to be more like Marvin Miller and Donald Fehr, past executive directors who held the union together by concentrating influence on the front lines of bargaining—the negotiating team and the subcommittee.

Meyer's job as lead negotiator hasn't changed. But as executive director, he has the added responsibility of building and holding consensus from about 6,700 members of the rank and file. □

FROM LEFT: GREG LOVETT/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES; LEV RADIN/PACIFIC PRESS/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

GOING FOR A SPIN

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

WHEN IT comes to photographing the Olympics, getting a great frame—like this wide shot of gold medal–winning figure skater Alysa Liu during her short program—isn't always the hardest part. That would be getting to the venue. Erick W. Rasco covered more than 30 events in his 18 days at the Milan Cortina Games. He spent much of that time negotiating with bus and shuttle drivers. But to even get to the pickup spot in the first place, he had to rely on a temperamental rented Alfa Romeo, which insisted on barking at him in Italian and occasionally engaged its own parking brake in the name of safety. (At one point, six guys had to help Rasco push the car out of the road.) But he persevered, and the results can be seen at **si.com/photos**. If the car could check out Rasco's work, it would have two words: *molto bene*.

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CORTINA
26

YOU USING THAT?

THERE'S A LONG TRADITION OF ATHLETES AND SECONDHAND GEAR

BY MARK BECHTEL

DURING A casual round of golf earlier this winter, Collin Morikawa borrowed a putter from one of his playing partners, Daniel Kitayama. "I said, 'Oh, let me try it,'" said Morikawa. "I tried it on maybe the 13th hole. Felt great. I jokingly said, 'I might have to take this.'"

He wasn't kidding. Morikawa kept the putter and practiced with it extensively. He used the club at the Phoenix Open and finished 54th. The following week at Pebble Beach, Morikawa used the TaylorMade Spider Tour X putter again—and won for the first time on Tour since October 2023. "It's mine now," Morikawa declared after the win.

That was just the latest in a long line of athletes notably borrowing (or "borrowing") someone else's gear and (often) finding success.

1912

Jim Thorpe ▸ Prior to the 1,500-meter race in the decathlon at the Summer Olympics in Stockholm, Thorpe's shoes were stolen. A teammate loaned him one (where the other was remains a mystery), and he found another in a trash can. The one from the bin was too big, so Thorpe wore extra socks to get a better fit—and won the race by nearly two seconds to clinch his second gold medal of the Games.

1978

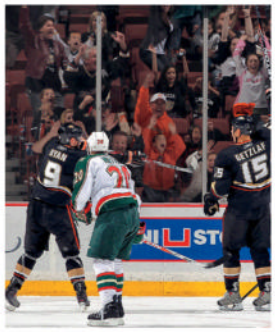
Bucky Dent ▸ It's a well-worn story: Dent's famous homer against the Red Sox in the AL East playoff was hit with a bat belonging to teammate Mickey Rivers. But there's more to it than that. Rivers had originally borrowed the bat from outfielder Roy White—who was on first when Dent homered. He got there on a single he hit using a bat he borrowed from infielder Fred Stanley.

1994

Daryl Johnston ▸ After Dallas won Super Bowl XXVIII in Atlanta, the gear belonging to the team's Pro Bowlers was shipped to Honolulu. One problem: The helmets were pilfered. The Cowboys fullback improvised, borrowing an extra from Packers QB Brett Favre. "I had to pump in so much air in Favre's hat I thought my head was going to float off," Johnston said after the NFC's win.

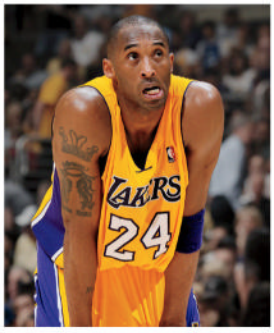
LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM TOP: JED JACOBSOHN/GETTY IMAGES; BRANGER/ROGER VIOLLET/GETTY IMAGES; DICK RAPHAEL; PAUL SPINELLI/AP

2010



Bobby Ryan ▸ Late in the second period of a game against Anaheim, Mikko Koivu of the Wild lost his stick, so he forcibly borrowed the one being used by Ducks forward Ryan. When he realized he wasn't getting his stick back, Ryan picked up Koivu's—and promptly scored with it. Said Ryan, "I just told him: 'You took mine … so finder's keepers, I guess.'"

2015–16

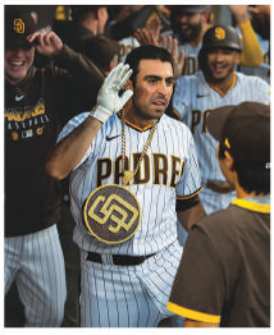


Kobe Bryant ▸ Then there's the opposite of borrowing. Late in his career, as the Lakers were in the midst of a 65-loss season, the Black Mamba got fed up with the effort of his team's younger players. After a blowout loss, he sent an equipment man into the locker room with a garbage can to repo the shoes of any player (with the exception of a few veterans) wearing Kobe's Nikes.

2018

Ester Ledecká ▸ The snowboarder surprised no one by winning the parallel giant slalom gold at the PyeongChang Olympics. She surprised everyone, herself included, by winning the Super-G. Ledecká was so lightly regarded in Alpine events that she didn't even have skis; she borrowed a pair from Mikaela Shiffrin. "Until today," she said, "I thought I was a better snowboarder."

2021



Daniel Camarena ▸ The Padres called up the reliever from Triple A El Paso on July 8. Since the minors use a DH, he didn't have a bat or batting gloves, so Gosuke Katoh of the Chihuahuas loaned him some gear—which Camarena used to hit a grand slam off Max Scherzer. He then called Katoh to ask for another bat. "Not because he wanted more," said Katoh. "Because they put that bat in the Padres Hall of Fame."

LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM TOP: DEBORA ROBINSON/NHL/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN W. MCDONOUGH; ALEXANDER HASSENSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES; MATT THOMAS/SAN DIEGO PADRES/GETTY IMAGES

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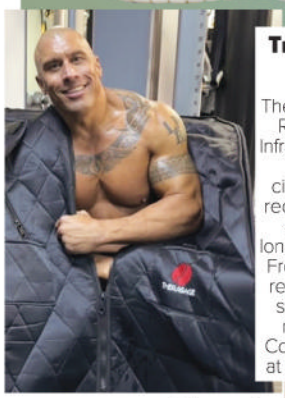

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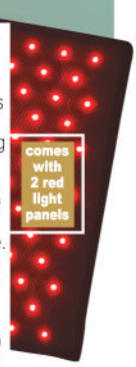

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FACES IN THE CROWD

BY DAN FALKENHEIM

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com.**

GAMBLE HARVILL ▸ Sport: Lacrosse ▸ Hometown: Bossier City, La.

Harvill, a sophomore attacker at Centenary College of Louisiana, scored 14 goals in a 21–11 victory over Hendrix College, setting the NCAA all-divisions record for most goals in a single game. Named the Division III USA Lacrosse men's player of the week for his performance, Harvill scored more goals (39) and points (45) through his first four games in 2026 than he had in 11 games last year.

MAYA JOHNSON ▸ Sport: Softball ▸ Hometown: Columbia Station, Ohio

Johnson, a redshirt senior pitcher at Belmont, threw a 15-strikeout perfect game in the Bruins' 9–0 season-opening defeat of Missouri State. Two days later Johnson tossed 12 strikeouts while only allowing one run in a 2–1 win against No. 15 Georgia to lead the program to its first win over a top-25 opponent. A 2025 All-American, Johnson had 24 wins, 366 strikeouts and a 1.52 ERA last season.

CRUZ STORER ▸ Sport: Swimming ▸ Hometown: Maui, Hawai'i

Cruz, a sophomore at Kamehameha Schools Maui, won state titles in both the 50-yard (20.18) and 100-yard (44.30) freestyle events, setting all-Maui records in both races and helping the school win its first state swimming championship. At the Hawai'i Senior Championships in November, Cruz set state 15–16 age group records in the 50 free, 100 free, 50 back and 100 back.

TRACK AND FIELD

Twin Wins

▸ **IN JANUARY,** when Mariah and Mia Maxwell lined up for the girls 60-meter final at the VA Showcase in Virginia Beach, sisterhood took a back seat. "It's tunnel vision," says Mariah *(center)*. "I'm not worried about who's next to me or who's behind me." That view is shared by Mia, who won the event in 7.20 seconds, just ahead of her sister.

The twins from Humble, Texas, dapped each other up soon after the race ended. They weren't done celebrating. Mariah set the national high school girls record in the 300 meters at the meet (36.24). At the Millrose Games in February, Mia won the junior 60-meter and triple jump titles while Mariah finished third in the pro 60m field.

The Atascocita High seniors won't be apart any time soon (both are Texas commits) and wouldn't have it any other way. Says Mia, "I've depended on her through my hard times and she's depended on me." Adds Mariah, "Track brought us together in ways that I don't think can compare." □

FROM TOP: KAYLEE KING; BELMONT ATHLETICS; COURTESY OF CHRIS STORER; TAVAN SMITH

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BY
Tom Verducci

DYNAMIC DUO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE

Ohtani and Judge were photographed together in New York City on Jan. 24. Ohtani is wearing a suit he created with BOSS Made to Measure, a personalized tailoring service.

2026 BASEBALL PREVIEW

The 2026 season begins with baseball being more popular than it has been in years, thanks to sluggers

SHOHEI OHTANI

and

AARON JUDGE.

The trick for MLB now is to keep the momentum going

NEVER MIND YALTA OR REYKJAVÍK. As summit meetings of superpowers go, nongeopolitical division, precedent for the one at a New York hotel ballroom in January could be found in French Lick, Indiana.

There in the summer of 1985, Boston Celtics great Larry Bird, the two-time reigning NBA MVP, hosted Los Angeles Lakers great Magic Johnson at his mother's house to shoot a Converse sneakers ad known as "Choose Your Weapon." Though Bird and Magic had competed against one another since the 1979 NCAA championship, the rivals kept such distance between them that they had not yet even casually shaken hands, no less sat down at Georgia Bird's kitchen table, as they did for a home-cooked meal that afternoon.

Bound as rivals and friends, Bird and Magic changed the trajectory of the NBA as an entry. They sold shoes, sure. They also sold the sport. The average NBA salary in the 1980s rose from $180,000 to $900,000. Bird or Magic—and three times both—played in every NBA Finals of the decade. They won six MVP awards in a seven-year stretch, interrupted only by the newly ascendant Michael Jordan.

Forty-one years later, the two greatest superpowers in baseball, Aaron Judge of the Yankees and Shohei Ohtani of

RICH GRAESSLE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (JUDGE)

"It means so much to him **BEING A CAPTAIN,"** *Boone says of Judge. "When we gather for the first full squad workout, he will make the lowest man out of the 65 or 70 feel a part of it. He's amazing at that."*

GOLDEN LUMBER
Judge's prodigious, record-setting power display with his Chandler bat lured Ohtani to the company.

the Dodgers, greeted one another for their first formal photo shoot together. No commercial was involved, but Judge and Ohtani, like Bird and Magic, chose the same brand of weapon—in this case, their bats, not their shoes.

After the 2022 season, prompted by watching Judge hit his American League–record 62 home runs, Ohtani, through his agent, Nez Balelo, contacted Chandler Bats, the maker of Judge's bats. Chuck Schuup, a Chandler rep, immediately began crafting a bat for Ohtani. Since then, Ohtani has hit the most home runs in baseball, 153, with Judge right behind him at 148.

Like Bird and Magic—one on the East Coast, one on the West, gobbling up MVPs, playing a sui generis style thanks to their size and strength—Judge and Ohtani are the standard bearers helping to carry their sport to heights not seen in a generation. Baseball attendance has increased three straight years for the first time since 2005–07. The World Series, in which Ohtani won his second straight championship since joining the Dodgers, averaged 34 million viewers in the United States, Canada and Japan, the biggest World Series audience since 1992. Game 7 attracted 51 million viewers in the U.S., Canada and Japan, the most watched game since Game 7 of the '91 World Series. Thanks to the pitch clock, the average time of game has been no more than two hours, 40 minutes for three straight years for the first time since 1983–85.

The 2026 season rides the wings of this renaissance but under the threat of a gathering storm: a labor war. Owners are likely to impose a lockout of the players when the collective bargaining agreement expires Dec. 1, as happened in 2021. That lockout ended after 99 days, just in time to preserve what is now a record 31-season streak without a game being lost to labor strife (since the MLBPA was officially recognized in 1966). An end to that streak would curb the game's momentum, not to mention stealing from the primes of Judge, who turns 34 in April, and Ohtani, who turns 32 in July.

From Babe Ruth and Rogers Hornsby, to Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio, to Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle, to Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa, baseball eras have been speckled with tandems of hitting contemporaries that dominate the game and generate national interest. But never like this.

Judge and Ohtani have together won seven MVP awards in the last five years, five of them unanimously. Over the past two seasons they have secured 107 of the 120 first-place MVP votes, or 89%. This year both have the opportunity for a never-been-done third straight 50-homer season. Over the past five seasons they rank 1–2 in the majors in home runs, slugging and OPS (Judge leads) and WAR and total bases (Ohtani leads).

Even dressed in formal wear, as they were for this cover shoot, Judge and Ohtani present an outsized physical bearing that adds, Marvel-style, to their superpower status. The 6'9" Bird was a tall sharpshooter without precedent, just as the 6'9" Johnson revolutionized the point.

At 6'7" and 282 pounds, Judge is not only the biggest of the four players to hit 50 homers four times (Ruth, McGwire and Sosa are the others) but also the biggest player to win a batting title and to hit as high as .331, which he did last year.

"How is that possible?" says Yankees manager Aaron Boone. "I asked him that question [in the offseason]. He was in the training room. I said this a lot last year: I never felt that he was ever totally locked in and on fire like he was during times in '22, '23 and '24. And yet he's hitting .331 with 50-something homers and an OPS a hundred points higher than everybody else.

"What he said was the one thing he always does is, he goes home in the winter and works on different little things. Guys always say, 'I want to keep getting better.' He takes it to heart. When he sets his mind to something, look out. And I think last year he figured out how to get his hits when he was not at his best. Pitches he might swing over and miss; he found a way to still have a competitive swing and still have power."

So efficient was Judge last season that in 679 plate appearances he grounded out to an infielder on the right side only twice, the same number of times he popped out to the pull side. He devours fastballs. Last year he hit .410 against them and slugged an absurd .874. He even improved his sprint speed to his best since 2022.

That Judge is still peaking at this age is all thanks to two tweaks he made in 2022: refining his swing to generate more balls in the air and adjusting his work and recovery to avoid soft tissue injuries. His four highest fly-ball rates have all come since then, a huge advantage for someone who last year saw more than one out of every three of his fly balls leave the yard (51 of 149). He has played 150 games three times in his 30s (winning the MVP each time) after doing so once in his 20s.

"He is conscientious about how he ages," Boone says. "He's really self-aware. That's the biggest thing in the last several years he mastered. He was very ticked off when he had injuries that cost him time. He's become very good at understanding what he needs to do to go to the post every day. He's learned how to back off once he gets into his season. Playing through minor stuff, he's really good at it. The little nagging injuries that come up, soft tissue–wise, he knows how to govern them."

Ohtani, too, is a physical outlier. There has never been a player this tall (6'3") and this heavy (210 pounds, a conservative listing) who has stolen 50 bases, as Ohtani did in 2024 in his unprecedented 50-50 season.

No one should ever stop marveling at how he is elite at two distinct disciplines, pitching and hitting, like juggling chainsaws on a unicycle. In the pennant-clinching game last fall, he struck out three Brewers in the top of the first, switched to his hitting gear, Superman-style, without having enough time to go into the dugout, then hit the first leadoff postseason homer as a pitcher. He hit two more homers (including one that flew out of Dodger Stadium) and struck out 10 in what has to be the most amazing playoff game ever.

Also under such consideration would be World Series Game 3, in which he became the first player to reach base nine times in a postseason game, including a record four intentional walks. He capped his season, which began with rehabbing a twice-repaired elbow ligament, of 175 games and 809 plate appearances (fifth most ever) by starting Game 7 on short rest—then proceeded to join Jeff Tesreau of the 1912 New York Giants as the only World Series Game 7 starting pitchers to reach base three times.

Even though he didn't pitch at all in 2024 and made only 14 mound appearances last regular season, Ohtani is an unprecedented two-way player. Ruth made only 34 starts on the mound as a full-fledged two-way player, after which he said, "I don't think a man can pitch in his regular turn, and play every other game at some other position, and keep that pace year after year."

> *"Our guys understand what he means for the Dodgers," says Roberts. "They realize he's a* **GREAT PERSON** *and a great teammate whose world is different from everybody else's."*

Ohtani has made 100 mound starts as a two-way player. The Dodgers expect him to make between 23 and 28 this year, as he did for three seasons (2021–23) with the Angels.

"We are of the mind that this is a long-term play, obviously with this contract and doing the two way," says Dodgers manager Dave Roberts. "So, if that's the case, then what does that look like? I think that the No. 1 thing is you're talking about pitching. I don't think the plate appearances are going to change. Pitching, he came into camp as a regular healthy player, preparing for a season, not in rehab mode. I think that the six, seven, eight days in between starts is totally feasible.

WAVE OF JUBILATION
Resale tickets were going for well into four figures to see Ohtani take on the Cubs last March in the Tokyo Series.

ROBERT GAUTHIER/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

"And then it goes to each game managing him within the game. Are there going to be times that I push him? Sure. But I would say for the most part, I'm still taking a long view—look at the pitching this season and beyond.

"This is sustainable, because of who he is, how well he knows himself and how well he trusts us in the sense of how we're going to manage him."

Bird was an inveterate trash-talker. Magic was the stage-ready magician who ran the Showtime Lakers. Judge and Ohtani do it differently. They hold up the game as Atlas did the heavens: pure strength under enduring, quiet responsibility.

"He understands his standing in the game," Boone says of Judge, "but it all starts with him being a great Yankee. It means so much to him being a captain. The way he makes his teammates feel. ... When we gather for the first full squad workout, he will make the lowest man out of the 65 or 70 feel a part of it. He's amazing at that."

Says Roberts of Ohtani, "Our guys understand how good he is and what he means for the Dodgers. They realize he's a great person and a great teammate whose world is different from everybody else's. He wants to be the best player in the world and above all he wants to win."

Over the past two seasons pitcher Ryan Yarbrough has been a teammate of both Ohtani and Judge. He has pitched against them with little success, allowing a .308 average to Ohtani and .381 to Judge while marveling at how they've done it. "I'm thinking, *Cool, if I just keep it down and away, they may get their hits but not with damage*. That's not the case with either one. They both have the ability to elevate the ball with power no matter the location."

More impressive, Yarbrough says, is how they carry themselves as teammates. He sees in each one a Zen-like quality to remain calm amid the tension of a game or the noise around their celebrity status as standard bearers. "They seem larger than life," Yarbrough says, "and yet it's really easy for them to be just one of the guys."

Judge and Ohtani. Ohtani and Judge. Their greatness separates them from all their contemporaries except from one another, like a rare conjunction of celestial bodies deep in Atlas's heavens. Only seven players have posted back-to-back 50-homer seasons. Judge and Ohtani are the first pair to do so together with at least 7 WAR in both years. It is baseball kismet that their peaks should align like this, and raise the game by the power of two. □

BY **Tom Verducci**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ERICK W. RASCO**

PRINT

27 SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

2026

BASEBALL

PREVIEW

Yes, Los Angeles spends gobs of money. But if you think payroll is the only key to domination, you're missing the truth behind why **MLB'S MODEL FRANCHISE** is on the verge of a World Series three-peat

THE IDEA SPRUNG from a common malady that vexes your average salesperson from Sheboygan: travel delays. While flying 49,141 miles in 2024, second most in baseball, the Dodgers reached a breaking point of spending too many hours on the ground, whether it was waiting for equipment to be loaded, mechanical delays, crews timing out or the like. They did something about it.

JON SOOHOO

For the 2024 postseason they booked a second team plane. The first plane would carry only the players. It would leave as quickly as possible after games. The second plane would ferry staff, support personnel and equipment. The main motivators were to give the players up to an hour head start on rest and recovery and to build more camaraderie. It worked so well the Dodgers decided to use the two-plane system for all of 2025.

"Playing in Los Angeles has a ton of perks and advantages," says team president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman. "We don't even know where our tarp is. Our games are never affected by weather. We have 50,000 people every night. But the travel is more challenging."

There also was a hidden agenda behind the perk, which Friedman shared with first baseman Freddie Freeman at its 2025 rollout: make other players envious of how the Dodgers treat their players. Late in the season, Freeman circled back to Friedman with a report on that mission.

"Hey, you know how you said you hoped this kind of spread and got around the league?" Freeman told Friedman.

"Yeah. That was our hope."

FLYING HIGH

Non-cash perks like a players-only plane help Friedman (bottom) land stars such as Tucker (below, with Gomes and Roberts) for less than market value.

FROM TOP: JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA/IMAGN IMAGES; SEAN M. HAFFEY/GETTY IMAGES

"Well, I cannot tell you the number of guys who get to first base and they're all like, 'Hey Freddie, is it true you guys have a players-only plane?' "

Says Friedman, "I was like, 'All right. Great!' "

The Dodgers are the Rich Uncle Pennybags of baseball. It may seem they throw around Monopoly money. Their projected 2026 outlay in player salaries and luxury tax is $527 million, or more than the White Sox, Rays, Nationals, Guardians and Marlins combined. Last year they paid more in taxes ($169.4 million) than a dozen teams paid their players to actually play baseball. This year free-agent signee Kyle Tucker will cost them more in salary and taxes ($119.9 million) than eight teams will pay their entire roster. They have close to $1.1 billion in deferred player salary they fund.

It's this kind of spreadsheet auditing with a neon highlighter that leads to narratives that the Dodgers are "ruining" baseball and that they are the canary in the coal mine that signals a coming labor war over the game's economic system. Meanwhile, the Mets have outspent Los Angeles in payroll and taxes the past four years, $1.69 billion to $1.66 billion, but don't get nearly as much grief as a threat to the system because they haven't finished in first place in a decade. Nobody threw shade at Rich Uncle Pennybags when the Padres and Diamondbacks sent the Dodgers home quickly from the playoffs in 2022 and '23.

The rhetoric that the Dodgers are too big and too good for baseball has grown because they won the last two World Series—but only after surviving two 2024 NLDS elimination games against San Diego and a 2025 World Series Game 7 deficit when down to their final two outs with their No. 9 hitter at bat. It gained steam this winter when the team addressed its biggest needs, outfield and closer, by signing Tucker and Edwin Díaz to record-setting contracts. They are favored to join the 1998–2000 Yankees as the only teams in the free agency era to win three straight titles, as well as become the first National League team to three-peat. The Dodgers don't hide from such historic expectations. They welcome them.

"This is the most talented roster we've ever had coming into camp," Friedman says. "Obviously, there are no guarantees in this sport, but we feel as good as we can about the position player group and it's the most pitching depth I've *ever* been around."

There is no denying money allows L.A. a fat margin of error. It can pivot from the mistake of free-agent closer Tanner Scott (signed for four years, $72 million in January 2025), at least as last year is concerned, to Díaz (three years, $69 million). It can re-sign reliever Evan Phillips, who had Tommy John surgery last June, at a salary and tax outlay of $13.7 million on the hope that he throws about 30 innings in the second half of the season.

To win back-to-back titles and three of the past six, however, requires more than a checkbook. Under Guggenheim Baseball Management, which bought the Dodgers in 2012 as

Dodgers
ANGELIERS
23

MAN IN THE MIDDLE

Betts instantly changed the Dodgers' culture when he arrived in 2020 with his work ethic and selflessness.

the franchise emerged from bankruptcy, and Friedman, who arrived from Tampa Bay two years later, the Dodgers have built a culture that is the envy of baseball.

"We've gotten calls from agents over the last couple years of guys that we hadn't even expressed interest in," Friedman says, "and they said, 'Hey, my player's getting close to making a decision. He's begged me to just call you. Before he says yes somewhere else, he wants to know if you would have any interest.' To me it speaks volumes to the culture that's been created.

"We've talked about this for 10-plus years now, how the real guiding light principle for us is trying to become a destination spot—where our own players don't want to leave and players from other organizations want to come. Obviously, it's easy to set our goals to win a championship. But we feel like creating that culture not only attracts and retains star-level players but also helps get the most out of their ability. I feel like we've really gotten to a point where it is incredibly strong."

The players-only plane is the can't-miss, 125-ton symbol of such a culture. (Friedman wouldn't confirm the cost, which is said to be about $7 million a year. He says it's "worth it.") The rest of what makes the Dodgers the Dodgers is not so visible.

On Dec. 1, 2023, Friedman, GM Brandon Gomes and manager Dave Roberts met with then free agent Shohei Ohtani and his agent, Nez Balelo, at Dodger Stadium. Friedman told Ohtani, "However differently people define our success over the last 10 years, I feel very confident that with where we are right now, our next 10 will be better. And if you join us, then I feel exponentially better about it."

Friedman then talked Ohtani through the depth of the Dodgers' farm system.

"[Baseball] is designed for us to be at the bottom in terms of farm system rankings," Friedman said. "Picking at the end of the draft ... having less international money ... always being competitive and so therefore not really being able to trade off players as they're nearing free agency. ...And yet, we're in the top three, top five, every year."

Ohtani suddenly stopped him.

"How?" Ohtani asked.

It is the existential question to the Dodgers' success. Not "how much?" But "how?"

Friedman answered Ohtani by talking about "cohesiveness and collaboration" and "the stability and the continuity of our group," principles that apply to more than the player development system.

How did the Dodgers build themselves into a destination team, a franchise so attractive that players like Tucker take less money to join? How did they avoid the corrosive elements of satiety and individualism that typically follow one championship? How did they conquer the minefield that is postseason baseball? According to Friedman and key insiders with the team, these are the main architectural building blocks of the modern dynasty.

THE CATALYST

IN CONSECUTIVE Decembers, 2017 and 2018, Friedman pulled off two salary-dump trades, one with the Braves and one with the Reds, to limbo underneath the first luxury tax threshold. By resetting the Dodgers' tax rate on overages from 50% to 20%, Friedman saved $36.2 million in the 2021 and 2022 seasons. More importantly, the Dodgers were stashing payroll for a major purchase.

"We knew [in 2018] in the next 24 months that three impact players were going to be on the market and at a young age," says a veteran baseball operations executive. "Bryce Harper, Manny Machado and Mookie Betts. We always felt Mookie

SMART SPENDERS

Over the last three seasons the Dodgers had MLB's second-highest payroll, but they're not dominating with dumb money. When you look at payroll dollars per win in that span, L.A. was more efficient than other deep-pocketed teams.

TEAM	TOTAL PAYROLL*	TOTAL WINS**	$$/W
Mets	$ 1,096,288,112	254	$ 4,316,094
Yankees	$ 957,326,126	281	$ 3,406,854
Rockies	$ 530,629,702	163	$ 3,255,396
Angels	$ 666,879,434	208	$ 3,206,151
Dodgers	**$ 965,803,224**	**315**	**$ 3,066,041**
Red Sox	$ 719,584,198	249	$ 2,889,896

* 2023–2025 COMBINED

** REGULAR SEASON AND POSTSEASON

ROBERT GAUTHIER/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

was the right guy, largely because of everything we knew about him as a person."

The Dodgers did make a run at Harper, but with a four-year, $180 million offer that did not address his desire for a long-term home. When negotiations on an extension between the Red Sox and Betts went nowhere, Los Angeles swooped in and traded for him in February 2020. They signed him five months later to a 12-year, $365 million deal with $115 million deferred, bringing the present day average annual value down to $25.6 million. Betts helped deliver a world championship in his first year with the team. He volunteered to switch between the outfield and infield.

"We've had a lot of really talented, impactful players in our clubhouse leading up to that," Friedman says, "but Mookie was really the catalyst that helped push it over the edge in terms of how we prepare, how we compete and how every detail matters. You know, talking about baserunning and talking about defense is one thing, but showing the work that is required behind it is what matters. I feel like he was a real catalyst as far as pushing us over the edge to help create the environment we have today."

THE HAIL MARY

THE DODGERS PREFER contracts with terms of three to five years to allow roster flexibility and to avoid paying premium money for declining players.

"We have been very selective about the guys that we are willing to go long term with," Friedman says. "And for us it is way easier if we've had a guy than if we're getting them from another team. There are just very few guys out there that we would feel comfortable making those types of bets with. Mookie was definitely at the top of the list. Freddie was not—only because we didn't expect him to really be available."

Like most people, Friedman assumed Freeman would return to the Braves when was a free agent after the 2021 season. Just minutes before the start of the lockout that December, Friedman, Roberts and infielder Justin Turner stepped away from Betts's wedding reception to place a call to Freeman.

"Hey, we're not going to be able to talk for a little while, so just keep us in mind," Friedman told the first baseman. "Just don't forget about us."

Says Friedman, "But the feeling was that was just a Hail Mary."

The Braves traded for Matt Olson to replace Freeman when the lockout ended in March 2022. The Hail Mary landed. L.A. signed Freeman to a six-year, $162 million contract that with $57 million deferred drops to an AAV of $24.7 million. In Betts

HEAD DOWN
The Dodgers got more than an elite bat and glove in Freeman; his focus and preparation set a standard that players at every level follow.

JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES

FREEMAN
5
GOD MAN
15

and Freeman, the Dodgers' two best players were now also their two hardest workers.

"We are very attracted to players who make it a priority to prepare themselves to go win a baseball game that night," Friedman says. "It sounds simple, but I understand it's not. It's not universal. I really enjoy looking out at three o'clock on the field and seeing our superstar players doing early work. And then you look across the field toward the other dugout and it's usually the 12th and 13th position players for that team who are out doing early work. I love that sight every time I see it."

Asked to identify an unseen key part of the Dodgers, one of the team's baseball operations analysts said, "The culture of early work Freddie, [infielder] Miggy [Rojas] and Mookie have created. They are out before batting practice every day talking ground balls and doing their glove work. That has trickled down to Triple A, as well as guys who go up and down. It's an attention to detail and routine that our coaches have mentioned they don't really see any other teams doing throughout the year.

"It comes down to the culture that has been built. Not the rah-rah culture but a combination of preparation and expectation from the players to coaches to scouts to the front office. The players hold themselves accountable because they know the ultimate goal is winning championships. Personally, I think that's a big part of what Andrew is looking for makeup-wise in free agency and trades—if we give this guy money, is he going to care less or be unchanged in his desire to win?"

ASTATINE

THIS IS HOW agent Scott Boras refers to Ohtani. At less than 30 grams in the Earth's crust, astatine is the rarest naturally occurring element on the planet. The rarity of Ohtani is not just that he is a two-way player of unprecedented volume and skill. It is also that Ohtani volunteered to defer all but $2 million in annual salary from his 10-year, $700 million contract, an unheard-of gesture driven by his desire to allow the Dodgers to spend more around him and made easier by his enormous endorsement income as an international icon. Last year Ohtani earned more than $100 million off the field.

Says Friedman of the deferrals built into Ohtani's Dodgers contract, "It was to a level I definitely would not have had the guts to propose."

The deferrals turned Ohtani into a $46 million a year player for luxury tax calculations, allowing the Dodgers to sign pitchers such as elite righthanders Yoshinobu Yamamoto and Tyler Glasnow and two-time Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell. All four starters, pulling down $1.34 billion in combined contracts, pitched in Game 7 of the World Series last year.

"Shohei," says one Dodgers executive, "changed everything economically. The size and the scale of the business exploded."

The executive estimates Ohtani generates $200 million in annual income for the Dodgers. Boras puts the estimate at $275 million. "We had Ohtani's [market] value at $1.3 billion when he signed," Boras says. "The fact is the signings of Mookie, Freddie and Ohtani are all greatly discounted. Freddie's contract is half of what he's worth."

Ohtani offered the Angels a similar deal to remain with them. They passed, in part because they rejected the idea of deferred money. In Betts, Freeman and Ohtani, the Dodgers

ERICK W. RASCO

wound up with three future Hall of Famers and the core to back-to-back World Series champions because their original teams allowed them to leave.

The Dodgers had been scouting Ohtani since high school. They knew just about everything about him, including how at age 15 he was so well-mannered and focused that he drew a diagram with 81 boxes in a nine-by-nine grid filled with training goals and ideals to help him reach the center, where he wrote, "Get Drafted 1st Overall." The path to the center included reminders to "Pick Up Trash" and "Keep Room Clean" (he's such a neatnik he will pick up errant gum wrappers on the dugout floor), "Calm Mind, Burning Heart," "Be Someone People Want to Support" and "Read Books."

The Dodgers tried to sign him in 2017, only to lose out to the Angels, prompting Friedman's brother to text him, "Nice job selling Los Angeles." Two seasons with Ohtani have broadened Friedman's appreciation for Ohtani even more.

"Given he has the discipline and the focus to arguably be the greatest player who's ever played," Friedman says, "what stands out is just how down-to-earth and normal he is. A lot of guys that are great at what they do have some narcissistic tendencies. He is exactly how you would draw up the ideal personality to match with that ability—how much he cares about winning, how much he embodies that on a daily basis with how he prepares and how he competes. He's got that killer streak in him."

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

WHAT WINS in October? It's an age-old riddle that has grown increasingly tricky with expanded playoffs. After the Dodgers followed 211 regular season wins in 2022 and 2023 with a 1–6 record in the postseason, the front office launched a deep analytical dive into what went wrong.

"The showing in '22 and '23 was so bad it bothered everybody," says one senior official who worked on the study. "I won't say what we found, but we looked at everything from the roster, to how we play, to the mindset."

The remedy came from within the clubhouse.

"What makes this team really special is two years ago we felt like we needed to pay more attention to little successes throughout the year," says Rojas, who joined the team in a January 2023 trade with the Marlins. "Because this organization was used to dominating the regular season and not getting too excited for little moments within the season that make you ready for what is coming next. So, in '23 when we got slapped in the face again, the core of the team understood we had to prepare for October.

"We weren't prepared for the playoffs. How do you prepare for the playoffs? If you can really simulate a playoff game, it's like taking those games in the middle of the year and celebrating those moments—like you did something, you want something. That's been the culture change. It happened here a couple years ago."

Says Roberts of the evolution, "We didn't solve the postseason, but I think that we really understood that the postseason is a street fight. The regular season is a conventional boxing match. It's an old-school, 12-round, stick-and-jab fight with your technique. I'm not trying to bang analytics, but analytics and technique is the long game. The postseason is a UFC cage fight. And you've got to get your hands dirty because it's quick.

GUT REACTION

A historic Game 7 home run from Rojas (left) might never have happened if not for another non-financial Dodgers x-factor: Roberts's well-managerial instincts.

"If you don't have that mentality in a five-game series, you're going home. And that's what happened to us. First the Padres. Then the Diamondbacks. There wasn't any fear. And they came out swinging and we were trying to get into the game, the boxing match. And we went home before we knew it."

Roberts, too, has been an October difference-maker. A manager's importance rises in the postseason because of the blink moments, unplanned situations that require urgency, not the data-thick staff planning meetings with a room full of people. "Last postseason Doc gave a master class in managing," says a rival general manager.

The Dodgers are 24–9 the past two postseasons, including 10 come-from-behind wins, 6–1 in one-run games and 4–0 in extra innings.

THE MAESTRO

WHILE THE DODGERS have a robust analytics department, they do not emphasize it above traditional baseball operations development methods. It's the genius of Friedman that he creates a symphony from among the different perspectives of uniformed staff, medical team, player development and analytics.

"These silos cannot exist separately," says one front office executive. "[Friedman] is really good in that space. He's patient. He's not a reactor. He's a problem solver by nature. What we do best is more the application of technology and analytics than just spending our way through."

The Dodgers still remind themselves about DJ Peters, a 6' 5" highly athletic outfield prospect who dominated the hitting lab by smashing the ball 115 mph, posting outlier numbers on a machine that measures ground forces and crushing the high-velocity pitching machine. After five years in the Dodgers' system, Peters hit .197 in 70 major league games in 2021 while striking out more than a third of the time. He's now out of baseball.

Says Rojas, "I think the organization uses [analytics] a little bit more than the players. We have a really old locker room. I feel like we use it, but we feel like it's out there for them to know what we're doing. At the end of the day, we're not following it too much because we know winning is about what you do every single day to prepare.

"You will see a lot of working on the little stuff. Preparation that way is maybe not as fun as being in a lab and hitting 106 miles per hour off the Trajek machine. We kind of put our preparation more into the little details that we can control, because it's really hard to control everything that is out there.

"It's not a lab out there. Analytic labs? We have one, but is that the key to success? I don't think so. I think that the key to this team is knowing what you need to do every single day to prepare."

THE NEXT WAVE

THE DODGERS are not above making mistakes. They traded Oneil Cruz and Yordan Álvarez for next to nothing. They paid Trevor Bauer $61 million to make 17 starts before releasing him after MLB suspended him for violating its domestic violence and sexual assault policy.

Consulting with key players is a valued source of information for Friedman, who doesn't stop there. He says, "We try to get as much information as we can from teammates, coaches, clubhouse guys, media, broadcasters ... as much information as we can get to make the calculated bet on whether or not they fit well within our ecosystem. And it's by no means perfect. But I think directionally it's very helpful in our selection process."

By adding Díaz and Tucker this winter, Friedman began leveraging the team's destination status. It's the next layer to the Mookie-Freddie-Shohei core. "Edwin Díaz obviously was at the top of our list," he says, "but with a pretty low degree of confidence that we'd be able to get him, just because his team, the incumbent, also has similar resources."

After the Mets caught Díaz a bit off guard with the signing of

NEXT IN LINE

The addition of Díaz [right] made other teams grumble—and made another parade in L.A. more likely.

ERIC THAYER/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

Devin Williams, another closer, and after hearing New York was slow to counter a request by Díaz, Los Angeles pounced with an aggressive bid. "It wasn't until two or three days before we agreed that we felt like we really had a chance," Friedman says.

Tucker turned down $350 million over 10 years from Toronto to take $110 million less over four years with the Dodgers.

"Our owner's mindset is for all of us to not be flippant about where we are and to do as much as we [can] to try to maintain this," says Friedman. "This is a really special group. To be aggressive to enhance and augment it we felt was the prudent play. And the level of partnership and appreciation for our fans who show up 50,000 strong every night and travel on the road ... just the passion that our fans have ... yeah, we feel immense pressure to pour back into them."

BRANDON SLOTER/GETTY IMAGES

> "Says Friedman, "Our fans show up 50,000 strong every night and travel on the road ... just the passion that our fans have ... yeah, we feel immense pressure to pour back into them."

The argument of whether the Dodgers are too rich and too good for baseball will be decided at a labor negotiating table. There is no argument about what they are on the diamond: a star-studded team defined by its collective will.

"The big part of who we are," Roberts says, "is that we have our guys believing that it's bigger than themselves. In this day and age of self-promotion, a lot of sports is individual driven. But I think our guys do as good a job as anyone in sacrificing certain things for the best interest of the ball club each day. Whether it's playing time, roles, whatever it is. And when you have players like Freddie, Shohei and Mookie, everyone's going to be following in line. We're fortunate with those guys."

The players-only plane grabs your attention, but Rojas, a $5 million utility infielder last year, may be the best way to explain why the Dodgers win. After L.A. lost to Toronto at home in World Series Game 5 to put them on the brink of elimination, Rojas sat alone in the third base dugout for 20 minutes.

"I'm thinking, *This might be my last time at Dodger Stadium with a Dodger uniform on. Wow*," Rojas says. "I'm going to be 37 years old next year. I'm a free agent. I don't know if these guys want me back. I was taking a little bit of extra time to reflect on what an amazing ride it was. I didn't want to take my whites off because I knew it could be the last time."

By the time Rojas finally returned to his locker, a text was waiting for him on his phone. It was from Roberts: "You're in there at second base for Game 6." Rojas had not started a game in 25 days. Roberts did not consult the data or matchups. He simply decided he could not bear the idea of losing the World Series without giving one of his team leaders a chance to play. Rojas texted back, "I got you, Doc."

It was Rojas who saved the season twice in the ninth inning of Game 7: first with his two-strike, tying home run in the top of the inning, and again when he threw out Isiah Kiner-Falefa at home in the bottom of the inning.

"When the guys on the team told me, 'You saved us,' I said, 'No, I didn't save you guys. You guys saved me, saved my career, and gave me an opportunity to play another year.'" says Rojas, who is returning this season on a one-year, $5.5 million deal. "I feel like that's how we all feel. They give me the credit. I give the credit back.

"That's the reason why this organization is special. We all know that they're making a lot of money, right? We have guys that can win a Cy Young or an MVP. But from my perspective, I don't see them chasing that. I'm seeing them doing whatever it takes for this team to win. Everybody who steps into this clubhouse can tell you the same thing."

A month after Game 7, Rojas was sightseeing around the Trevi Fountain in Rome. A man recognized him.

"Thank you," the man said. "You are a hero."

Says Rojas, "We took a picture, but I've always thought, *I couldn't do it if I was on the bench*, you know? You really feel like if you join this team, it's for nothing else than winning championships." □

2026

BASEBALL

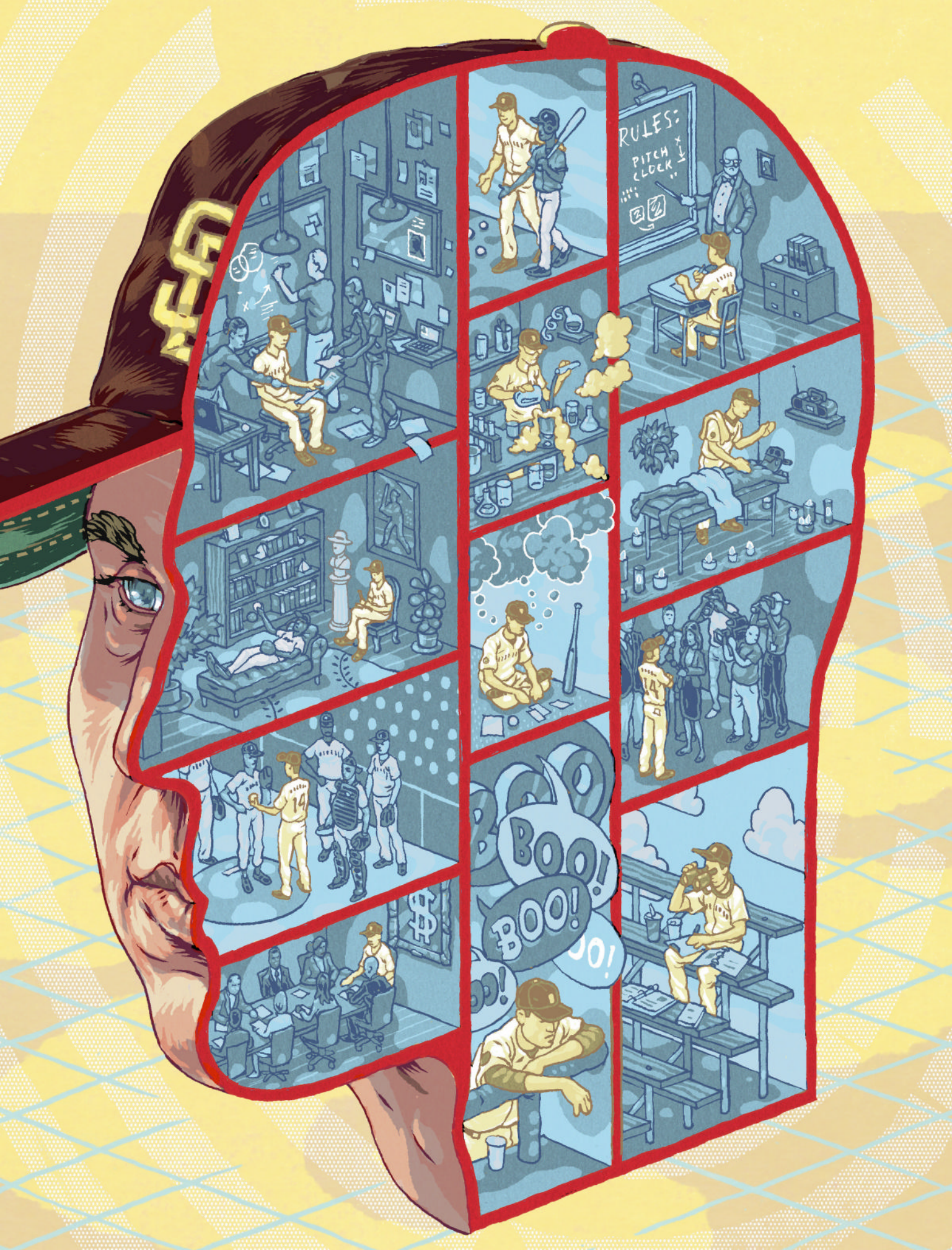
>> PREVIEW <<

WHAT'S THE BOSS?

BY **Stephanie Apstein**

Where have you gone, Billy Martin? The job of an ***MLB MANAGER*** *is no longer the domain of gruff former players—unless they're also the perfect combination of statehead, amateur psychiatrist, media expert, TikTok adopter, motivational guru ...*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **ANDREW DEGRAFF**


RULES:
PITCH CLOCK
BOO!
BOO!

THE SOUND of the wood bat still turns Tony Vitello's head. The new manager of the Giants is trying to figure out where the bathrooms are and what the rules are and who the players are, but he is also trying to get used to the most visceral change of all: *crack* instead of *ping*.

After 24 years coaching at the collegiate level, Vitello admits he will miss the metal bats a bit. "But this is so natural," he says. "It's a tradition-based sport. That's part of the tradition."

In some ways, Vitello is, too. Sure, he's an unconventional choice, the first person to go straight from the college ranks to major league manager. But these days, a brief résumé is more common than a lifetime of riding the buses and filling out lineup cards in the minors. Of the eight managers hired since the end of the 2025 regular season, only three had done the job before; only two of the remaining five had ever led a team in pro ball. Neither Craig Stammen (Padres) nor Kurt Suzuki (Angels) had ever even so much as coached before.

All these men will try to tackle a job whose description seems to grow longer every day. The modern manager must navigate a clubhouse and the stars and scrubs therein; keep track not just of whose arm hurts but also of who is arguing with his wife; absorb and process information from quants and scouts alike; disseminate that information to people who want varying degrees of it; solicit opinions and then massage the egos of those whose advice he did not take; address the media at least twice per day; take public responsibility for decisions he did not make; and represent a multibillion dollar corporation on the global stage while dressed in baseball pants.

Oh, and he has to decide whether to pull the starter in the third inning.

"Seven to 10 [p.m.]," says Atlanta general manager Alex Anthopoulos, "feels like the smallest part of the job."

The manager might be the most important job in the organization. And we're still not entirely sure what makes someone good at it.

EVERY SO OFTEN, Tigers manager A.J. Hinch hears from an old Astros coworker who wants to reminisce about a play he called in the second inning of Game 7 of the 2017 World Series, with one out and one of the slowest runners in the sport, catcher Brian McCann, on third base. Houston pitcher Lance McCullers Jr., who bats left-handed, grounded to second. McCann, who was going on contact, scored to extend a lead the team would not relinquish. It was the most valuable such groundout in baseball history, and it was Hinch, then the Astros' skipper, who told McCann to go. It's one thing for a manager to call the contact play in July with a guy who runs like an umpire. It's another thing entirely to do it in Game 7 of the World Series.

"What I learned about moves that are made in the World Series is that you have to make those moves long in advance," says Hinch. "Meaning you have to be in front of that decision by

how you prepare your players and how you set the foundation of how you're going to play and the why behind it. You're always preparing for future decisions by the decisions you make today."

Rangers GM Chris Young estimates in-game decision making constitutes "10 to 15%" of a manager's job. That figure might be on the decline as new rules—the universal designated hitter, the ghost runner on second base in extra innings, the limit on mound disengagements—reduce the number of choices at any moment. "In a lot of ways, it's more checkers than it is chess," says White Sox assistant GM Josh Barfield. "It's taken out some of the strategy."

So much of that strategizing takes place long before the game begins. "I don't know how many managers just make their own decisions," says Royals skipper Matt Quatraro. He's not even just referring to the front office. There are so many more people involved these days: the research department, the trainers, the mental skills staffers, the bench coach, the pitching coach, the hitting coach. And sometimes he takes all that information and still chooses not to field the best team possible, because sometimes he wants to give perennial MVP candidate shortstop Bobby Witt Jr. a day off.

"A lot of the philosophies are good until you have to actually apply them," Quatraro says. And you have to force yourself to focus on process over result. "I think when you're a younger manager, you have a hard time accepting that you could make the right decision and have the wrong outcome," says the 51-year-old Hinch.

The tactical moves are the only part of the manager's job that the fan sees. (Managers often joke, "If I don't matter, why do you keep yelling at me?") But before they can pinch-hit in the ninth inning, they have to have received scouting reports from the advance guy on the pitcher they'll face as well as tendency and pitch-shape and swing-plane data from the quants. They have to have laid the groundwork with both the pinch hitter and the guy he's replacing. Both need to prepare for their roles, and both need time to tend to their feelings about the situation. In some ways, that's just the same as it ever was.

"We're still chasing matchups," says Hinch. "We've always chased matchups. We're just willing to do that a little more aggressively today than we were." He adds, "All the things that may drive the traditional fan crazy, it's actually just emphasizing the strengths of the players."

But in other ways, the decision-making process would be completely unrecognizable to a manager from 30 years ago. Reds skipper Terry Francona says that when he started with the Phillies before the 1997 season "there was the general manager and the assistant general manager and that was about it." These days, teams often employ 50 analysts. "It can be a little overwhelming," Francona says. Still, he adds, "In today's world of analytics and numbers, I feel an obligation to the organization and to the team not to guess. Does that mean I'm going to make every right [decision]? No, but I'm going to have a reason. When you forget you're dealing with people, I think you're making a big mistake."

ONCE IN A while, someone wanting to talk to Guardians manager Stephen Vogt has to wait a minute outside his office. Vogt is busy crying in the bathroom.

It's important, he says, to understand "that what might be a minor transaction in your eyes is a huge moment for that player, and being able to have empathy with the most no-brainer option, or the most no-brainer DFA, or whatever it might be—that's the worst day of that person's life." So he tries to sit down with every player who is getting bad news, and sometimes he becomes so upset on the young man's behalf

that, even after the kid has left and tossed his glove into a duffel bag, the manager is still recovering from the conversation.

"I think you create a good atmosphere and a good environment, a learning environment, a commitment, a team atmosphere that leads to success," says second-year Rockies manager Warren Schaeffer. "That is my main job, because I spend most of the day doing it. Running the game, that's three hours. I spend 12 hours on culture."

Perhaps Vitello's time surrounded by teenagers will help him relate to younger major leaguers. The former Tennessee coach, who led the Volunteers to a College World Series title in 2024, is used to the Gen Z attention span—"They've been on TikTok," says the 47-year-old. "They've got about 20 seconds."—and he is ready with strategies to keep his players engaged. "Show some videos," he says. "Sometimes cracking jokes works."

Such answers can sometimes veer into cliché, but this cohort does require different methods of connection. Young people today communicate through their phones more often than face-to-face, so a manager has to be adept at both channels. And he has to account for the anxiety that a digital childhood can foster. "Today's player has to understand why," says Guardians GM Mike Chernoff, 44. "And you have to provide evidence. The traditional *because I said so* doesn't fly." Today's player is also at least as familiar with most data as his coaches, and his coach better be as fluent in that language as he is. "This is how they've grown up in the game," says Rockies president of baseball operations Paul DePodesta. "This is an expectation."

Most people shy away from the idea that managing is increasingly a young man's job, perhaps because they hope one day to be old men in that job. ("What I think is happening is general managers are becoming younger," says Francona, "And they're looking for people they're comfortable with.") But the 41-year-old Vogt, who spent 10 seasons in the majors as a catcher, acknowledges that he was caught off-guard by the physical toll. It's a long season even if you're not playing in it. So he does an Orange Theory fitness class every morning. "I want to make sure my heart's healthy," he says. "I want to make sure I don't get too sloppy."

Young managers do have an advantage when it comes to relatability. "The players look at you differently when there's a wider age gap or different experience, or when you've accomplished something in the game, or as you become more notable," Hinch says. His solution is "to allow yourself to be vulnerable," he says. "I really want them to understand that I make mistakes too, and I know how hard the game is."

The job gets harder as you become more notable, too. "I have to fight harder to stay connected to the thing that matters most, which is the relationship with the players," says Dodgers manager Dave Roberts. "The irony is the thing I got into this because I love, which is coaching, is the thing that you do the least of as you climb the ladder."

THAT'S ESPECIALLY TRUE for the Dodgers, who with their three Japanese stars have to answer as much to fans in Tokyo as in Los Angeles. But each team, and each market, brings its own difficulties.

"I'm not sure all 30 of us have the same job," Hinch says. This has always been the case; Phillies president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski remembers being a young administrative assistant with the 1978 White Sox, a year after they made a surprise run at the pennant with a veteran team. That winter, they let several older free agents walk and halfway through the '78 season fired their 57-year-old manager, Bob Lemon, who immediately went to the Yankees and won the World Series. The young White Sox finished last. Dombrowski asked Chicago GM Roland Hemond if he thought he'd made a mistake.

"I remember Roland said, 'Dave, it's just different clubs,'" Dombrowski recalls. "'When we had the club in '77 over here, we got a club that you could make the lineup out, let them play. Lem was real good with that. Good with the players, good communicator, had a good feel of pitching. But in '78 we had a young club, and he just wasn't the right manager for this situation. Then he went to the Yankees, who were a veteran club, and he was perfect for them.'"

Hemond also used to say that Boston, New York and Philadelphia are different from the other major league cities. Once, when someone asked why he hadn't gotten the managerial job in Boston, Dombrowski admitted, "I think you'd have a hard time dealing with the media here." (The candidate eventually got a job elsewhere.)

> *"What might [seem] a minor transaction is a huge moment for that [released] player," says Vogt. "Being able to have empathy—that's the* **WORST DAY** *of that person's life."*

The general manager also needs to evaluate himself, says Young. During his first years in Texas, veteran skipper Bruce Bochy was the perfect counterpart for him, because Young was still learning on the job. When Bochy retired after last season, Young decided he had enough experience to work with someone greener, and he selected Skip Schumaker, whose year as Cardinals bench coach and two as Marlins manager still make him nearly a veteran in today's game.

It can be hard to find the right fit, says one official, because "a lot of front offices don't know what they want." They do a poor job of evaluating their own organization, he continues, and they choose a manager who does not fit the club. At least one team this winter declined to consider a second-time manager because execs thought his hire would not excite fans. That sort of decision making misses the point. For example, the official says, "In a rebuild, I'd hire an incredible communicator, because he's going to be communicating to your players on the vision of the organization and the expectation of the organization. You're probably going to have a mediocre team with young prospects coming up at some time. The second thing he's gonna be doing is telling your fan base what you're doing and why you're doing it. Those two skills alone are way more than the grit of, like, that 2–1 hit-and-run that you called in the seventh inning."

After the worst year in major league history, a 2024 season in which they went 41–121, the White Sox tried to be honest with themselves about what they needed. Will Venable, who had spent three years coaching with the Cubs, two as the Red Sox' bench coach and another season as the Rangers' associate manager, seemed like someone who could handle multiple iterations of the same team.

"We wanted somebody that was going to be good for when he was hired, like, in a rebuild or whatever you want to call it, and for when we're good," Barfield says. "So there were some guys that we interviewed, and we were like, 'Man, this guy would be awesome if we were ready to win right now.' But you don't want to have to [fire him in two years]."

IN ANTHOPOULOS'S first year as GM, for the Blue Jays in 2010, he looked around the division and saw Francona managing the Red Sox, Buck Showalter managing the Orioles, Joe Girardi managing the Yankees and Joe Maddon managing the Rays. "There's a 'wow' factor," Anthopoulos recalls. He looked at hiring a manager like courting a free-agent player: You go after a superstar. Only as he got older did he realize: Bryce Harper was always Bryce Harper. Brian Snitker wasn't always Brian Snitker. "Until, [after four decades in the organization], he finally got a chance to manage and won six divisions in a row and a World Series," Anthopoulos says. "And all of a sudden he's one of the best managers in the game."

So how do you find Snitker before he's Snitker? You run through in-game situations, of course. You ask for strengths

and weaknesses. You check references. Some teams ask candidates about their favorite leadership books. They don't expect an encyclopedic knowledge of the genre, but they figure you can't be very serious about the position if you haven't consulted any of the literature. (Good answers might include *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni; *Dare to Lead* by Brené Brown; or *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge.) They want to try to predict how he will handle pressure—not just the pressure of high-stakes games, but also the pressure of a disappointing season. Young says one of the best pieces of advice he got when embarking on his first managerial search was to hire someone he liked being around.

The Guardians' process has become legendary throughout the game. Chernoff and president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti put Vogt through 28 hours of interviews over the course of two and a half weeks; they grew so close during that period, Vogt says, that after one call, his wife, Alyssa, turned to him and said, "You better win this." (By then he was in good shape. Five minutes into their first Zoom call, Chernoff says, he texted Antonetti: "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Antonetti responded, "Yes.")

The Guardians have compiled a detailed profile describing what they're seeking. Chernoff categorizes it generally as personal factors, interpersonal factors and cognitive factors. It's hard to find someone who checks every box, and in fact they never do. "That's why you do crazy interviews," he says. Because the other thing they are looking for is someone they can coach. They see a failed manager as not only a failure of hiring on their part but also a failure of development on their part. "And it's a two-way street," Chernoff says. "Vogter is developing us, too. We are becoming better."

Vogt often jokes with Chernoff and Antonetti: *You know so much about me after that interview process that if you don't like my decisions, that's on you.*

Chernoff agrees. It is.

DOMBROWSKI HAS long kept a file of people he thinks might be interesting managerial candidates someday, but even that extensive list sometimes misses people. Between the time when Rob Thomson joined the Yankees' major league coaching staff in 2008 and when Dombrowski promoted him to Phillies manager in '22—Thomson has made the playoffs four times and won a pennant—Dombrowski hired three skippers during his tenure running the Tigers and then the Red Sox. Thomson was available every time. Dombrowski never considered him. "It's apparent we were underestimating his ability to do the job," he says.

Indeed, many of the very traits that make Thomson such a good manager made him hard to identify as a potential manager: a quiet steadiness; an emphasis on the needs of others, often to his own detriment; a focus on doing the job, instead of making sure everyone notices that he's done the job.

"Maybe [the industry] missed [those qualities] because we forgot those were important," muses Hinch.

So what exactly are they looking for? In a sport that can increasingly slap a number on every player, teams still aren't quite sure. "At the end of the day, there's only one guy on the mound, there's only one guy in the box, there's only one guy standing at his position," Anthopoulos says. "So it's just so much easier to quantify."

Sometimes the old-school background is important. "I'm glad I had the journey I did, because it allowed me to make some mistakes that weren't on *SportsCenter*," says Francona, who helmed teams from rookie ball and Double A to the Dominican Winter League before working his way up in the majors as a coach. He also values the time he spent with less talented players, which helps him appreciate what he sees every day now. And he needed to fail in his first shot, with the Phillies, before he could succeed.

> "Each market brings its own difficulties. Says Roberts, "The irony is the thing I got into this because I love, **WHICH IS COACHING**, is the thing you do least as you climb the ladder."

Sometimes teams bet on the person instead of on the résumé. "I know I came into the business in a unique manner," says Hinch, who became the Diamondbacks' director of player development a year after retiring as a player and then got his first managerial gig straight from that role. (Arizona fired him a year later and he only found success in his second go-round, with the Astros.) "But that didn't mean that experience didn't matter. It just meant that I was starting behind." He adds, "The things that veteran managers have brought to the game are still very valuable, and you can't get them any other way than the way that Boch got it, and Snit, and [two-time manager and current Giants infield coach Ron Washington]."

And sometimes they are just making their best guess. "Of the [five] new-guy first-timers, [two or three] are probably gonna be good and [two or three] are probably gonna suck," says an official. "Just like the old-timers."

The Giants are betting Vitello will fall in the former category. "If we're really being honest with ourselves, there's going to be some things that he just can't know until he's here and experiences [them]," says GM Zack Minasian. "But also, we talk about being willing to zig when others are zagging. Tony will bring a very fresh perspective, and he's got a great group around him. I give him a lot of credit for the coaching staff that he's built [including Washington and former Padres manager Jayce Tingler]. I think hopefully they can fill in some of the gaps, and then help him just accentuate his strengths."

At the annual Cactus League media day, the Giants' contingent was posted alongside the Brewers'. After Vitello took close to an hour's worth of questions, he approached Brewers manager Pat Murphy, perhaps the only person in the league whose background even remotely resembles his own. Murphy, who spent two decades at Notre Dame and Arizona State, had been in the majors for 14 years before he was named Brewers manager for 2024.

"I was certainly not ready [coming out of college]," Murphy said. "I needed to be more mature, needed to understand the game at the major league level. Yeah, it's a whole different game." Still, he believes Vitello is ready.

At his left, Vitello grinned. "Sir," he said. "Can I ask you how the f--- you coach the pro game?" □

BY **Emma Baccellieri**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **SIMON BRUTY**

2026 BASEBALL PREVIEW

After a hurricane forced them to spend last season in a minor league park (albeit one with hot tubs), the Rays learned that

BE IT EVER SO HUMBLE THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE

and the Trop is soooo humble

DOME
GET LOUD GET LOUD GET LOUD
REPUBLIC BANK
JABIL
Tampa Bay Times
FOX SUN
StateFarm
Spectrum mobile
142
144
PLEASE BE ALERT!
WATCH OUT
FOR BALLS LEAVING
THE FIELD OF PLAY

TYLER WALL has spent the better part of two decades working for the Rays. His job title is director of major league equipment and clubhouse operations. His work is anticipating problems and solving them. Last season, however, Wall encountered one problem that he thought he would never see with the Rays.

A player ran up in the middle of the third inning with an urgent request: "Dude, I've got to get my backup jersey, I'm soaked. I can't even play."

And that was the first sign that Wall and his team would have to completely overhaul their laundry routine. They always stocked backup uniforms at the Rays' traditional home, Tropicana Field. They just rarely actually used them, not in their 72°, air-conditioned dome in St. Petersburg. But that was going to change for 2025. Temporarily evicted from the Trop after Hurricane Milton severely damaged the stadium when it rolled through Florida in October 2024, they were playing their home games out in the brutal local heat for the first time.

The Rays spent last season at Steinbrenner Field, the spring training park of the Yankees, across the bay in Tampa. (A one-year deal granted the club full-time use of the facility for roughly $15 million.) The players, coaching staff and front office all praised their new home and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to play locally. But even the nicest spring training stadium is not intended for the grind of the regular season. It is also not intended to house major leaguers in the suffocating heat and rolling afternoon thunderstorms of Florida in August.

Forget a single backup uniform. One Rays pitcher kept tabs on his personal record: In his sweatiest outing, he went through four jerseys, two pairs of pants and a second pair of cleats. Wall and his crew had their hands—and washing machines—full.

The experience of playing at a spring facility stretched every member of the organization in one way or another. Which means the Rays will have a new perspective when they return to a fixed-up Tropicana Field this season: They have a fresh appreciation for their historically beleaguered field. "When the Trop is the topic of conversation, it's usually about what's wrong with it," says Rays president of baseball operations Erik Neander, who has been with the club for nearly 20 years. "That's changed now. Now it's about everything that's right with it."

They all know the quirks and flaws of their idiosyncratic old dome. (The organization is still aiming to build a new stadium after nearly two decades of failed deals and thwarted plans. There are new renderings for a Tampa ballpark—the anchor of a large development planned with both public and private funds—that would open in 2029.) But the Rays are thrilled for now at the chance to return somewhere familiar. Somewhere with a roof.

THERE IS perhaps no MLB stadium as perpetually tangled in criticism as Tropicana Field. It has been the subject of consternation since it was built. Before the Trop was known as the Trop, when it still carried its maiden name of the Florida Suncoast Dome, it picked up another moniker.

Some local media called it the Doom Dome.

The city of St. Petersburg began seriously planning for the stadium in 1984. (If they built it, a team would surely come, supporters argued.) They were anxious to beat out a rival group with its own sights on pro baseball just across the bay in Tampa. But there was little enthusiasm from MLB. Remarks leaked from a league committee on expansion: None other than Yankees owner George Steinbrenner supposedly declared St. Petersburg "nothing but a bunch of old folks over there and a rickety bridge to get there."

TAKEN BY STORM

One of the strongest hurricanes to hit the U.S., Milton did $34.3 billion in damage, including about $60 million to the Trop.

MLB could not exactly demand that a city not build its own stadium. But it could reiterate that it had no immediate desire to bring a franchise to St. Petersburg, and it could remind the city council that there were 12 other markets with potentially compelling expansion cases, including several in Florida, and it could have league commissioner Peter Ueberroth send a telegram to St. Petersburg mayor Edward L. Cole Jr. before a key council vote in 1986. "Any current decision by St. Petersburg to undertake construction of a facility capable of housing major-league baseball will be made by your community without any encouragement whatsoever on the part of Major League Baseball," it read.

The city broke ground on the stadium that year anyway. Construction finished in 1990. They had built it. And no one came. Or, at least, no one affiliated with professional baseball.

In 1991, MLB awarded its next expansion franchises to Miami and Denver instead of Tampa Bay. Several clubs that flirted with relocating ultimately stayed where they were. The dome hosted Arena football (the Storm of the AFL) and hockey (the Lightning of the NHL) before it saw baseball. But then came one more round of expansion. With a stadium already waiting and Florida politicians making noise about examining MLB's antitrust exemption when another proposed relocation fell through, the league granted a team to the region, and the stadium got its long-awaited ball club when the Tampa Bay Devil Rays debuted in 1998.

Which meant the stadium felt somewhat anachronistic even from the day of its very first ball game. This was fundamentally a ballpark of the 1980s, with its roof and its turf. Even among other concrete domes, Tropicana Field was a bit unusual at best, inaesthetic at worst. "Traffic is a nightmare going in or out, parking is woeful, and the place itself makes the Kingdome look like Wrigley Field," John Feinstein bemoaned in a 1992 column for *The New York Times*. Baseball was shifting back to neat brick recreations of jewel boxes. Here was an enormous, sloping, catwalk-supported dome that vaguely resembled a circus big top plopped down by the highway.

And so the story of the Rays became a story of a team angling to play anywhere but Tropicana Field. A stadium built in search of a team now housed a team in search of a different stadium. The following decades saw failed plans for (among others) a waterfront park in St. Petersburg, a shiny new stadium in Tampa, and one notably strange relocation scheme that would have seen the club splitting time between the Tampa Bay region

MIGUEL J. RODRIGUEZ CARRILLO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

"To see a place that you've worked for so long turn into sort of a **DISASTER AREA**... it really, really blows your mind how Mother Nature can do that to a building as big as the Trop," says Wall. "It's just saddening."

and Montreal. But while those ideas sputtered, the Rays stayed in the Trop, and like any ballpark, it came to feel like home for those who played and worked and became fans there.

What outsiders saw as flaws could be charming idiosyncrasies to those viewing them under the colorful lights of the dome. If other ballparks were newer and nicer, well, many of those ballparks also looked awfully similar to one another: No one ever accused Tropicana Field of lacking a sense of place. (It is and has always been clearly, indubitably a product of Florida.) And while the most scorned feature of the stadium was generally its roof, those who loved the park would argue that a closed, air-conditioned environment was valuable enough to be worth compromising on aesthetics.

"Negative people are all, *Oh, those catwalks are awful, the balls hit [them], it's got an ugly roof*," says Rays director of special projects and field operations Dan Moeller, who has been a groundskeeper for the franchise since its earliest days. "Well, it's a roof. There's nothing better than having a roof over your head."

It was the roof that suffered the most damage from Hurricane Milton. The white expanse could look from a distance like great panels of cloth. It was actually Teflon-coated fiberglass woven into a material that could move like fabric. The 100-mph winds shredded it and flooded the stadium with debris.

"To see a place that you've worked for so long turn into sort of a disaster area ... it really, really blows your mind how Mother Nature can do that to a building as big as the Trop," Wall says. "You see something that looks like it's indestructible just get crushed by the winds and the rains and it's just saddening."

With so much damage, there was no conversation about playing there in 2025. The deal for Steinbrenner Field was finalized in scarcely a month. After years of attempting to play in a different stadium, especially one across the bay in Tampa, the club would finally be doing exactly that—just not how anyone had ever imagined.

Countless adjustments were required. There were only four days to prepare the park between the Yankees finishing spring training and the Rays hosting Opening Day. (Although Moeller had arranged for several members of his groundskeeping crew to embed with the New York team there earlier in the spring: His unit needed a crash course in working an outdoor field.) Thousands of pieces of individual signage were hung to cover up New York logos with Tampa Bay ones. Mercifully, there was not much painting, as Yankees navy blue is a very

JULIO AGUILAR/GETTY IMAGES

GUEST HOUSE
The Rays sold out 61 of their 81 home games in St. Pete—and made it through the full season without a single rainout.

similar Pantone shade to Rays navy blue. The clubhouse was cleaned out and changed over. Players got used to a park with new dimensions and less foul territory.

But the biggest adjustment, by far, was the weather, and there was little that could be done to prepare for that. Plenty of MLB teams play outdoors in cities that get hot in the summer. But those cities generally do not get Florida hot. (The Marlins got themselves under a roof in Miami as soon as they could.) MLB had adjusted the schedule to cluster most of the Rays' home games away from the peak of summer. But that still left several homestands in July and August, when Moeller's game-day temperature readings could reach 120° on the clay, 110° on the grass. And when it wasn't miserably, oppressively hot, it was often raining or threatening to do so. The Rays had their first home rain delay in franchise history on May 10—the very first big-league, high-pressure, regular-season tarp pull for this groundskeeping crew—and went on to have 12 more.

MIKE CARLSON/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

> *"When the Trop is the topic of conversation, it's usually about what's wrong with it," says Neander. "That's changed now. Now it's about* **EVERYTHING THAT'S RIGHT** *with it."*

Some aspects of the situation were pleasant. Many players and employees had shorter commutes due to playing in Tampa instead of St. Petersburg. It was nice to play outside in April and September. There were several features of Steinbrenner Field that were fancier than anything at the Trop. (Players especially loved the whirlpools.) Moeller was glad that his crew got experience with a full season of an outdoor field. And while the Rays' overall record was a disappointing 77–85, they played better at home than on the road, going 41–40 at Steinbrenner.

Everything was perfectly manageable. But it wasn't theirs.

"I've stayed in hotel rooms that are nicer than my house," Neander says. "But home is still home."

ONE OF the first people inside Tropicana Field after the hurricane was St. Petersburg managing director of city development administration Beth Herendeen. She had worked her first job out of college at the stadium, back when it was called the ThunderDome in the 1990s and serving as the home of the Lightning, and it was unnerving to look up where the roof had always been and see only sky.

But she was also struck by just how much had held up. The roof was in tatters, and the field was covered in debris, but the concrete bowl and the concourses were untouched in many places. Herendeen passed a Coke bottle standing upright on a table. There was considerable work ahead. But it was all work that she believed they could do. "She may not be the prettiest stadium," Herendeen says. "But she is tough."

The city was legally obligated to repair the stadium while the lease with the Rays was still in effect. It ultimately cost nearly $60 million. One particular difficulty was keeping water out of the stadium every time it rained: "For every one inch of stormwater that fell from the sky onto that building without a roof, we were collecting a quarter million gallons of water inside of it," says Catherine Corcoran, the city's senior capital projects coordinator. Or in the eyes of Moeller, who kept close tabs on the old ballpark even as he worked every day at their temporary home: "The field would look like a lake," he says. "It was just, *Oh my, are we ever going to play here again?*" There was a real anxiety in those early months that perhaps they had played their last game there without knowing.

But a new roof was placed last fall, an upgraded, stronger fiberglass fabric, and a new field came next. The Rays will be back at Tropicana Field in April. They cannot wait.

"We've talked enough about the challenges with playing at Steinbrenner," says Rays manager Kevin Cash. "It was unique for all of us ... But there's genuine, authentic excitement to get back to the Trop."

They all know that Tropicana Field is not exactly a conventional baseball dream home. It's their home all the same.

"It doesn't get a lot of love," Wall says. "But we love it." □

AMERICAN LEAGUE

MVP
JULIO RODRÍGUEZ
Mariners • OF

One of the game's most well-rounded stars, the 25-year-old already has two 30–30 seasons—and could go 40–40.

Manager of the Year
CRAIG ALBERNAZ
Orioles

Baltimore's offseason spending spree has set up the first-year skipper to guide the O's from last place to the postseason.

Rookie of the Year
KAZUMA OKAMOTO
Blue Jays • 3B

No ordinary rookie, the 29-year-old averaged more than 30 homers in his last eight seasons in Japan and will earn $15 million this year.

Cy Young
GARRETT CROCHET
Red Sox • SP

The majors' reigning strikeout king also led all pitchers in xFIP last year, a strong metric for predicting future success.

AND THE AWAR

NATIONAL LEAGUE

MVP
SHOHEI OHTANI
Dodgers • SP/DH

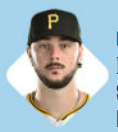
It's a safe bet to pick the guy who's won MVP in four of his last five seasons, especially now that his mound work will increase.

Manager of the Year
TONY VITELLO
Giants

His unprecedented jump from the collegiate ranks raised eyebrows, but his Giants have the talent to return to the playoffs.

Rookie of the Year
JJ WETHERHOLT
Cardinals • 2B

The 2023 NCAA batting champion at West Virginia is a legitimate leadoff option for St. Louis on Opening Day.



Cy Young
PAUL SKENES
Pirates • SP

Skenes had an ERA half a run lower than anyone else in the NL. Perhaps this year he'll get enough support to improve his 10–10 record.

BY **Will Laws**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ERICK W. RASCO**

2026 BASEBALL

PREVIEW

Can Aaron Judge become the first three-peat winner in AL MVP history? Will voters hold a Japanese slugger's age against him? Here's how we see the **HARDWARE HAUL** *shaking out*

D GOES TO...

LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM TOP: MICHAEL OWENS/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES; MIKE CARLSON/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; DANIEL SHIREY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; RICH STORRY/GETTY IMAGES; SUZANNA MITCHELL/SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS/GETTY IMAGES; JULIO AGUILAR/GETTY IMAGES

SCOUTIN

CAPTURE THE FLAG

With a potent lineup led by Julio Rodríguez, Seattle is primed to win its first AL pennant. Beating the Dodgers? That's another story.

KEEPING UP with the DODGERS

The champs set the standard in just about category every imaginable. [Except for frankfurters. Dodger Dogs are way overrated.] We've chosen five traits in which L.A. leads the pack and assessed how each team in the majors measures up.

2026 BASEBALL PREVIEW

NG REPORTS

POSTSEASON PREDICTIONS

AL WILD CARD

DETROIT **TIGERS** *OVER* NEW YORK **YANKEES**

BOSTON **RED SOX** *OVER* BALTIMORE **ORIOLES**

AL DIVISION SERIES

SEATTLE **MARINERS** *OVER* DETROIT **TIGERS**

BOSTON **RED SOX** *OVER* TORONTO **BLUE JAYS**

AL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES

SEATTLE **MARINERS** *OVER* BOSTON **RED SOX**

WORLD SERIES

LOS ANGELES **DODGERS** *OVER* SEATTLE **MARINERS**

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

55

STEPH CHAMBERS/ GETTY IMAGES

NL WILD CARD

NEW YORK **METS** *OVER* SAN FRANCISCO **GIANTS**

PHILADLEPHIA **PHILLIES** *OVER* MILWAUKEE **BREWERS**

NL DIVISION SERIES

CHICAGO **CUBS** *OVER* NEW YORK **METS**

LOS ANGELES **DODGERS** *OVER* PHILADELPHIA **PHILLIES**

NL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES

LOS ANGELES **DODGERS** *OVER* CHICAGO **CUBS**

FLEX, SPENDING
Toronto's optimism for a World Series return is based on the power of Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and an offseason free-agent outlay well north of $300 million.

MATHEW TSANG/ICON SPORTSWIRE/ GETTY IMAGES

AL

by TIM CAPURSO

EAST

THE AL EAST has a well-deserved reputation as one of the best divisions in baseball. It produced the last two AL pennant winners and has sent three teams to the playoffs in five of the last six seasons. Given that competitiveness, it's no surprise the division hasn't had a repeat champion since the 2021 Rays.

But the Blue Jays seem poised to end that streak. Fresh off of its first World Series appearance in 32 years, Toronto spent more money on free agents ($353 million) than even the mighty Dodgers. The haul was headlined by pitchers Dylan Cease, Cody Ponce and Tyler Rogers, and the team also brought over third baseman Kazuma Okamoto from Japan.

After losing 87 games last season, Baltimore brought in a new skipper, Craig Albernaz, and looks to regain its mojo after an aggressive offseason that was capped by the signing of former Mets slugger Pete Alonso (five years, $155 million) and a rare intradivision trade for former Rays starter Shane Baz.

After a three-year playoff drought (tied for their longest in three decades), the resurgent Red Sox captured a wild card last season. Boston will now rely on a retooled rotation behind ace Garrett Crochet and a young offense that scored the seventh-most runs in the majors last year.

The Yankees' biggest offseason expenditure was to re-sign Cody Bellinger (five years, $162 million). But last year's 94-win club is still led by back-to-back AL MVP Aaron Judge, and with ace Gerrit Cole expected to return from Tommy John surgery this summer, New York still has a championship ceiling.

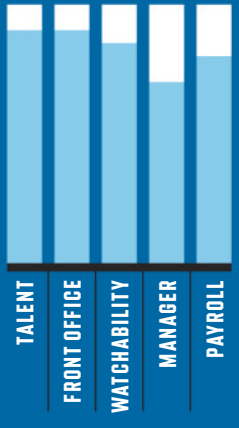
The Rays, after summer and winter sales, seem destined more for retooling than contention. But Tampa Bay has one of the sport's shrewdest front offices and always finds a way to compete.

ERICK W. RASCO

CODY BELLINGER

1 TORONTO BLUE JAYS

Projected Record..... 95–67

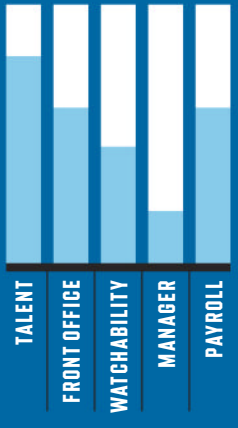


Now in his fifth year in Toronto, manager John Schneider came into his own in 2025 despite having entered the season as a lame duck. Rogers Communications, the team's corporate owner, has proven that it's willing to shell out to win a championship.

GEORGE SPRINGER

2 BALTIMORE ORIOLES

Projected Record..... 91–71

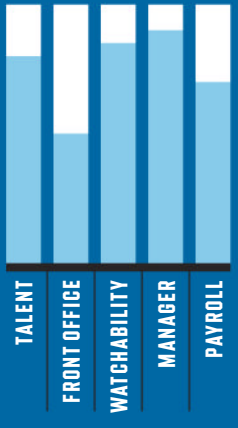


Despite an offseason spending spree, the Orioles are still well below the luxury tax line. Baltimore seems to have invested wisely, upgrading every part of the roster. A bounce-back year from Adley Rutschman, who slumped amid injuries, would help.

ADLEY RUTSCHMAN

3 BOSTON RED SOX

Projected Record 87–75

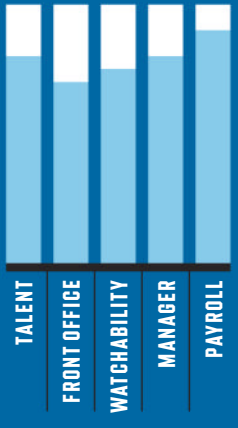


Chief baseball officer Craig Breslow seems to have the Red Sox on the right track. The veteran arms they've added greatly enhance their chances of advancing in the playoffs, and Alex Cora is one of just four active MLB managers with a World Series title.

ROMAN ANTHONY

4 NEW YORK YANKEES

Projected Record 86–76

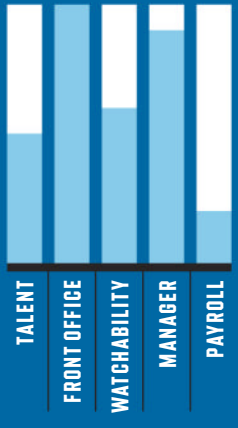


Fans are running out of patience with GM Brian Cashman and manager Aaron Boone. Cashman has won four World Series with the Yankees, but none since 2009 despite vast resources. New York has MLB's third-largest payroll but little depth.

GERRIT COLE

5 TAMPA BAY RAYS

Projected Record 73–89



The Rays have a history of thriving despite financial constraints, and president of baseball operations Erik Neander is entering his 20th season with the franchise. Junior Caminero looks to build off a breakout 2025 season (45 HRs, 159 hits).

JUNIOR CAMINERO

KEEPING UP with the DODGERS

FROM LEFT: ALIKA JENNER/GETTY IMAGES; BRAD PENNER/IMAGN IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO; NEW YORK YANKEES/GETTY IMAGES; KYREASE DESSEAU/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

by ▸ NICK SELBE

CENTRAL

FOR TWO years the AL Central has been a great source of late-season drama. In 2024 the Tigers rallied for a playoff push, but last year it was their turn to collapse, losing 13 of their last 16 games to cede the division crown to the Guardians. Detroit got the last laugh, though, by knocking Cleveland out in the wild-card round.

Entering 2026, the margins should be slim once again. The Tigers and Royals, who added hitting and bullpen depth, appear to be the class of the division. The Guardians, who ranked last in the AL in runs scored a season ago, are a step behind, followed by the rebuilding Twins and White Sox.

While no one team looks dominant, this division is not lacking in headliners. Tarik Skubal has won two consecutive Cy Young Awards, and this year he will be joined in Detroit's rotation by Framber Valdez, formerly of the Astros. Kansas City's Bobby Witt Jr. followed up his breakout 2024 campaign by once again leading the majors in hits. José Ramírez is perhaps the sport's most consistent star, and this off-season the 33-year-old signed a seven-year contract extension that will likely keep him in Cleveland for the rest of his career. Those top talents should once again bear the brunt of responsibility for keeping their teams in the division race.

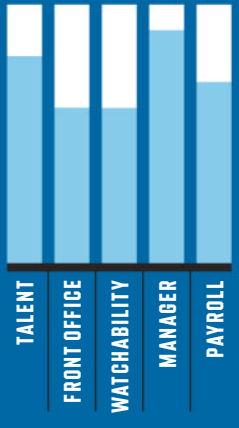
As for the White Sox and Twins, it will be surprising if either remains in the hunt for long. But at least Chicago has added some talent after three straight 100-loss seasons—most notably 26-year-old slugging infielder Munetaka Murakami from Japan—and the White Sox actually improved by 19 wins after 2024's nadir. Signs of progress are scarcer in Minnesota; the Twins sold off much of their roster at last year's trade deadline and are in a state of flux behind the scenes.

JUNFU HAN/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

TARIK SKUBAL

1 DETROIT TIGERS

Projected Record 89–73

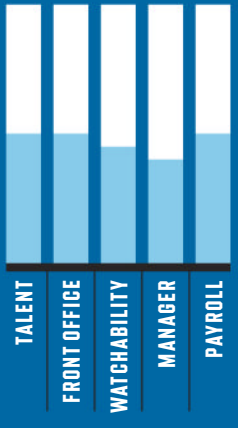


The Tigers have the most talented roster in the division, with four All-Star starters and six total last year—plus accomplished manager A.J. Hinch. Adding starter Justin Verlander and reliever Kenley Jansen makes their prospects even rosier.

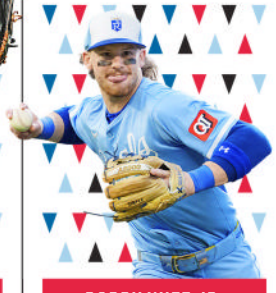
KERRY CARPENTER

2 KANSAS CITY ROYALS

Projected Record 85–77



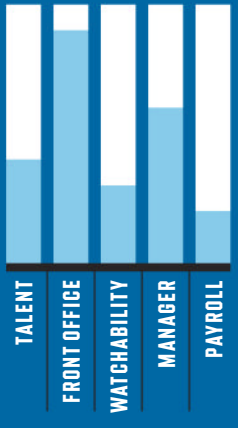
The Royals' years of tanking paid off with Bobby Witt Jr., who has established himself as a superstar. Kansas City's outfield remains suspect, though. And can soft-tossing starters Michael Wacha and Seth Lugo stay effective in their mid-30s?



BOBBY WITT JR.

3 CLEVELAND GUARDIANS

Projected Record..... 78–84

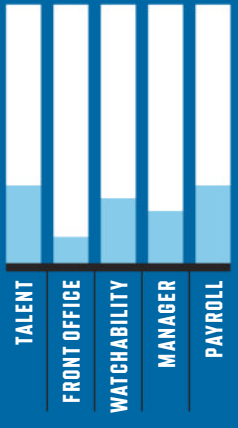


The Guardians don't score much or carry a high payroll, but they've made the playoffs seven times over the past decade thanks to a front office that keeps developing young talent. Stephen Vogt has won Manager of the Year in both of his seasons with the club.

JOSÉ RAMÍREZ

4 MINNESOTA TWINS

Projected Record 72–90

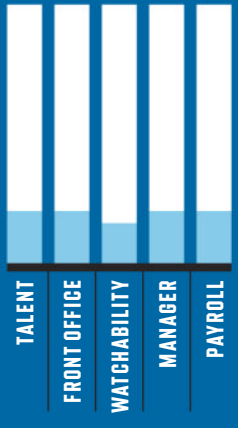


A sudden change in front office leadership late in the offseason followed a chaotic 2025 that featured a trade deadline fire sale. Talent like Byron Buxton remains, but more turnover is likely ahead. Expect things to get worse before they get better.

BYRON BUXTON

5 CHICAGO WHITE SOX

Projected Record 68–94



The White Sox haven't won a playoff series since their 2005 title year and are entering a fourth season of tank mode. Last season shortstop Colson Montgomery and catcher Kyle Teel emerged as bright spots, but Chicago still has a long way to go.

COLSON MONTGOMERY

KEEPING UP *with the* DODGERS

FROM LEFT: PETER AIKEN/IMAGN IMAGES; MATT BLEWETT/IMAGN IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO; KATIE STRATMAN/IMAGN IMAGES; PATRICK GORSKI/IMAGN IMAGES

AMERICAN LEAGUE

by ▸ NICK SELBE

WEST

AT LONG last, the Astros' reign—four straight division titles, eight consecutive playoff appearances— came to an end in 2025, and it was the surprising Mariners who won the AL West for the first time in a quarter century. Seattle came achingly close to reaching its first World Series before George Springer's late three-run dinger gave the Blue Jays the ALCS.

The Mariners look like clear-cut division favorites after retaining most of last year's core—including first baseman midseason pickup Josh Naylor, who signed a five-year, $92.5 million extension—and acquiring versatile infielder Brendan Donovan from St. Louis. Seattle's trip to the ALCS was a watershed moment for the franchise that still looks like its arrow is pointing up. With one of the league's best starting rotations—led by Bryan Woo, George Kirby and Logan Gilbert—plus 2025 home run leader Cal Raleigh and All-Star closer Andrés Muñoz, the Mariners have the pieces for another deep October run.

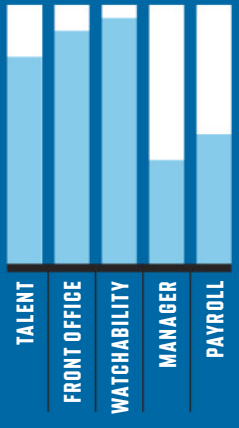
The Rangers and aging Astros won't let Seattle off easy, though. Texas made some aggressive moves to keep pace this winter, headlined by its trades for All-Star lefty MacKenzie Gore and outfielder Brandon Nimmo. Houston is hoping for a return to form by Yordan Alvarez (a career-low .797 OPS last year) and at least one more good season from vets Jose Altuve, 36, and Carlos Correa, 31. The A's laid a foundation for future contention with contract extensions to young bats Jacob Wilson and Tyler Soderstrom. Finally, there are the Angels, who hired Kurt Suzuki, their third manager in four years, as part of their cycle of wheel-spinning dysfunction. But hey, at least Mike Trout is coming off a (mostly) healthy season. Sometimes you have to take small victories where you can.

SIMON BRUTY

CAL RALEIGH

1 SEATTLE MARINERS

Projected Record 93–69

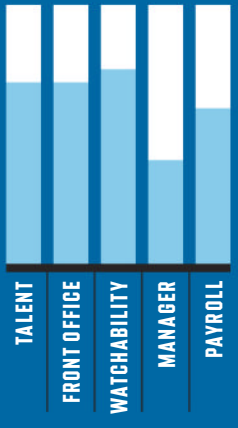


Executive Jerry Dipoto's stewardship has been the key to the Mariners' success over the past five years, a period in which they rank seventh in wins. This is as balanced a roster as you'll find in the league, and the payroll has space for midseason additions.

ANDRÉS MUÑOZ

2 TEXAS RANGERS

Projected Record 84–78

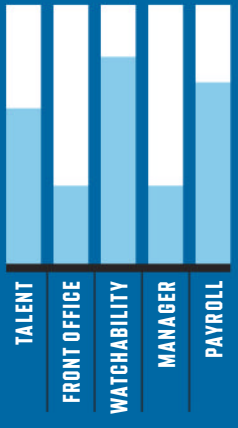


Skip Schumaker takes over for retired manager Bruce Bochy on a team that may be looking to scale back its spending. While Texas has anchors such as Jacob deGrom and Corey Seager, the roster also carries some prospects who have yet to pan out.

COREY SEAGER

3 HOUSTON ASTROS

Projected Record 83–79

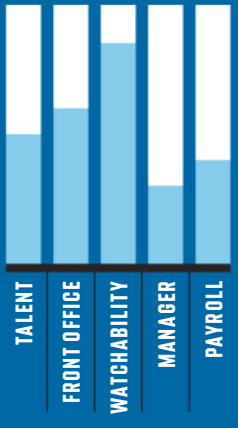


Houston's success over the past decade nearly equals that of the Dodgers, and new pitcher Tatsuya Imai, who had a 1.92 ERA in Japan last year, will help the rotation. But with an aging core and a bottom-rung farm system, the Astros' run seems to be nearing its end.

JOSE ALTUVE

4 ATHLETICS

Projected Record 79–83

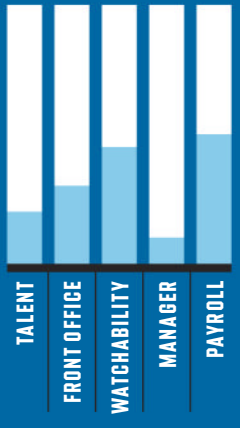


The A's have developed talent well and even loosened up the purse strings a bit ahead of their move to Las Vegas, planned for 2028. Locking in several homegrown players indicates a commitment to competing—a low bar to clear, but a step in the right direction.

NICK KURTZ

5 LOS ANGELES ANGELS

Projected Record 69–93



The Angels are mired in an MLB-high 11-year playoff drought. Owner Arte Moreno has shown he's willing to spend to some extent, but he runs a rudderless franchise with a manager on a rare one-year contract and one of the worst farm systems in the game.

MIKE TROUT

KEEPING UP with the DODGERS

FROM LEFT: RYAN SUN/IMAGN IMAGES; JAY BIGGERSTAFF/IMAGN IMAGES; ALIKA JENNER/GETTY IMAGES; KELLEY L COX/GETTY IMAGES; ISAIAH J. DOWNING/IMAGN IMAGES

BEAR DOWN

With his stolen bases [35] and diving catches in center field [lots], Pete Crow-Armstrong of the Cubs rarely had a clean uniform—and that grit has Chicago confident it can improve on last year's 92-win total.

MATT DIRKSEN/CHICAGO CUBS/GETTY IMAGES

NL

by WILL LAWS

EAST

THE NL EAST failed to send a team to the NLCS in 2025 for the first time in seven seasons. The division's three top contenders responded to their disappointing years in very different ways.

After the Mets collapsed down the stretch last year, lead executive David Stearns reshaped the team's core with a focus on defense—though free-agent additions Bo Bichette (third base) and Jorge Polanco (first base) will now be playing unfamiliar positions. New York is a threat to win the division, which they haven't done since 2015, but the radical amount of turnover (five new starters in the field) will be a challenge.

The Phillies decided to keep the band together, re-signing 2025 NL home run champ Kyle Schwarber and longtime catcher J.T. Realmuto. Stalwarts such as Realmuto (35) and Bryce Harper (33) have started to show their age—Harper's .844 OPS was his worst in seven seasons in Philadelphia. But the team's pitching staff does give the Phillies a leg up.

The Braves, who missed the playoffs for the first time since 2017, retained their core but made improvements to the supporting cast. Atlanta will look for bounce-back seasons from several hitters who slumped last year (Michael Harris II and Ozzie Albies, to name two), but the big concern is the rotation, which is led by a pair of pitchers (Chris Sale and Spencer Strider) with troubling injury histories.

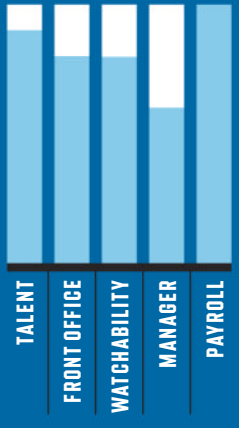
The Marlins nearly finished .500 last year but can't be expected to compete for the NL East crown with such an unproven roster: No one in their projected starting lineup has even three years of service time. Miami should at least finish ahead of the Nationals, who hired a startlingly young braintrust this offseason (the manager, GM and president are all in their 30s), traded All-Star pitcher MacKenzie Gore and appear set to start another rebuild.

FRANCISCO LINDOR

JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES

1 NEW YORK METS

Projected Record 91–71

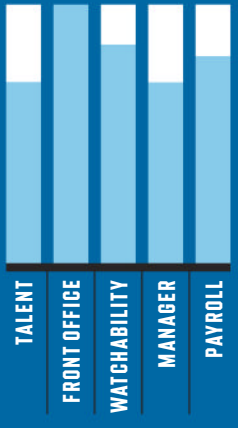


Steve Cohen is the only owner willing to spend as much as the Dodgers. That's helped the Mets build a deep roster around Francisco Lindor and Juan Soto. New York may still be a bit short on elite pitching, though top rookie Nolan McLean could help there.

JUAN SOTO

2 PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

Projected Record 88–74

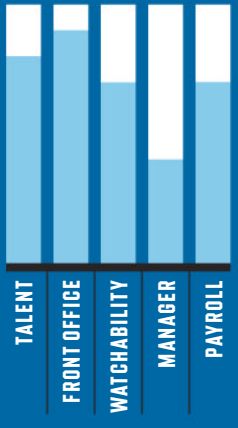


Dave Dombrowski has built many contenders, but his winter inactivity, aside from re-signing Kyle Schwarber and J.T. Realmuto, was jarring. Adding Adolis García to replace Nick Castellanos isn't a title-winning move. The Phils need a fresh wave of young talent.

KYLE SCHWARBER

3 ATLANTA BRAVES

Projected Record 85–77

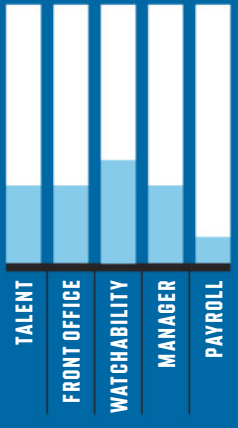


Former Rockies manager Walt Weiss takes over for Brian Snitker. GM Alex Anthopoulos has shown he can construct a title team, but the Braves need stars Ronald Acuña Jr. and Austin Riley to stay on the field more than they did last year.

RONALD ACUÑA JR.

4 MIAMI MARLINS

Projected Record 74–88

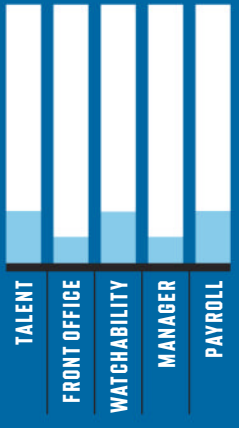


Miami punched above its weight last season and still only won 79 games. Kyle Stowers leads an underrated lineup, but the core of this roster is a year or two away from peaking. The Marlins will need more investment when its contention window opens.

KYLE STOWERS

5 WASHINGTON NATIONALS

Projected Record 57–105



New manager Blake Butera, 33, and executive Paul Toboni, 36, may provide the youthful energy the Nats need to stomach the long rebuild ahead. But for now, James Wood is their only recent All-Star on the roster and their pitching staff is MLB's weakest.

JAMES WOOD

KEEPING UP with the DODGERS

FROM LEFT: ERICK W. RASCO; KIYOSHI MIO/IMAGN IMAGES; DALE ZANINE/IMAGN IMAGES; JOHN JONES/IMAGN IMAGES; DARREN YAMASHITA/IMAGN IMAGES

NATIONAL LEAGUE

by KARL RASMUSSEN

CENTRAL

THE NL CENTRAL hasn't been much of a force lately. The curse-breaking Cubs squad of 2016 was the last team from the division to even make it to the World Series.

Last season Chicago won 92 games, its most since 2018, and the Cubs have fortified their roster by adding veteran third baseman Alex Bregman, starting pitcher Edward Cabrera and a bevy of quality relievers. Those moves make Chicago one of the league's most balanced teams and a title contender.

The Brewers have won this division three years in a row, and they'll be in the mix to repeat in 2026. Though they arguably have baseball's best farm system, the decision in January to trade All-Star righty Freddy Peralta (17–6 last year) to the Mets for highly rated prospects diminishes their standing this year.

Though the Reds have not finished better than third in the NL Central since 2012, the team has enough arm talent in its rotation for a surprise playoff run if everything breaks right. While Cincinnati had a quiet offseason, the team did bring back third baseman Eugenio Suárez, whose 49 home runs last year in Seattle and Arizona more than doubled the tally from Elly De La Cruz, who led the Reds with 22.

The Pirates have finished in fourth or worse every year since 2017. Pittsburgh hit the fewest home runs in MLB last season (117) but added some pop to the lineup with second baseman Brandon Lowe and first baseman Ryan O'Hearn. Those sluggers—plus the league's No. 1-rated prospect, 19-year-old shortstop Konnor Griffin—should provide some much-needed offense.

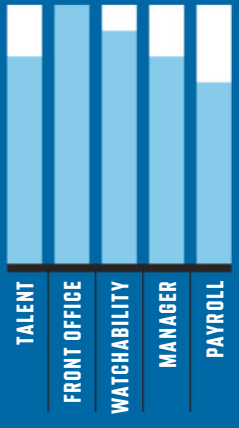
As for the Cardinals, they look destined for a fifth-place finish, having leaned fully into a rebuild by parting ways with veterans such as Nolan Arenado, Willson Contreras and Sonny Gray.

MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

JACKSON CHOURIO

1 CHICAGO CUBS

Projected Record 93–69

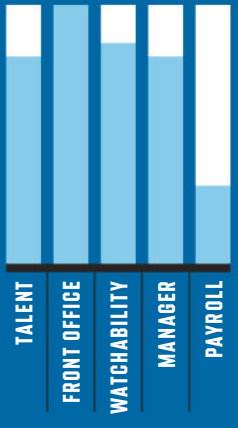


The Cubs clearly value depth over star power, because their roster is filled with solid players yet no A-listers. The lack of a fear-inspiring Game 1 starter could hurt in the playoffs. But manager Craig Counsell has the pieces to get this team there.

SEIYA SUZUKI

2 MILWAUKEE BREWERS

Projected Record..... 87–75

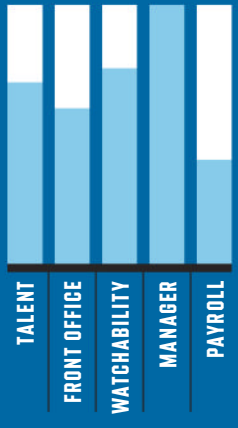


Milwaukee traded Freddy Peralta and its two most valuable rookies, Caleb Durbin and Isaac Collins, to adhere to its philosophy of selling high on players. GM Matt Arnold and manager Pat Murphy know how to win, but ownership may be asking a lot of them.

BRICE TURANG

3 CINCINNATI REDS

Projected Record..... 82–80

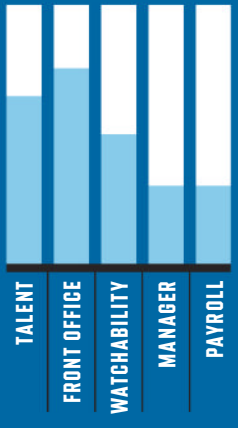


That Terry Francona was lured out of retirement to manage a middling franchise still boggles the mind more than a year later. Hunter Greene has Cy Young potential atop a rotation that may be the division's best. Elly De La Cruz, however, could use more lineup support.

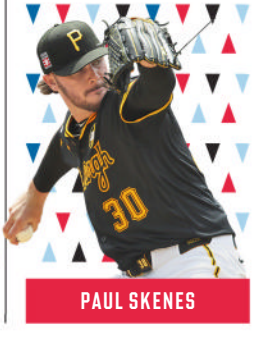
HUNTER GREENE

4 PITTSBURGH PIRATES

Projected Record..... 80–82



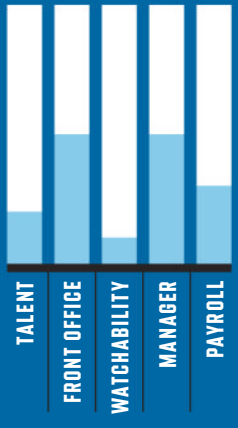
In his sixth year in town, GM Ben Cherington was finally given the green light to crack open the checkbook, and he strengthened both the lineup and the pitching staff in free agency. The key will be getting more out of the players who were around last year.



PAUL SKENES

5 ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

Projected Record..... 63–99



Chaim Bloom, the executive who came to St. Louis from Boston in 2024, is in the process of overseeing another rebuild in a city that is unaccustomed to losing on the diamond. Unfortunately for Cardinals fans, this teardown project has only just begun.

MASYN WINN

KEEPING UP with the DODGERS

FROM LEFT: KAMIL KRZACZYNSKI/IMAGN IMAGES; KEN BLAZE/IMAGN IMAGES; CHARLES LECLAIRE/IMAGN IMAGES; JAY BIGGERSTAFF/IMAGN IMAGES; JEFF CURRY/IMAGN IMAGES

by ▸ RYAN PHILLIPS

WEST

THE NL WEST feels like a chase where the leader already knows it won't be caught. The two-time defending champion Dodgers kept spending with impunity this offseason, splashing more than $300 million to sign outfielder Kyle Tucker and reliever Edwin Díaz, thus patching the only holes on their loaded roster. Everyone else is scrambling to keep up—except the Rockies, who took a wrong turn somewhere around 2019.

The Giants made a major move last June by acquiring Rafael Devers from the Red Sox. This winter was about rounding out a lineup that ranked 17th in runs in 2025. Additions such as outfielder Harrison Bader and infielder Luis Arráez will help, but while those players are good, they are not "beat the Dodgers" good.

The Padres, whose payroll had ballooned to the third highest in MLB in 2023, will once again attempt to contend while bowing to fiscal reality. But that task became tougher with a flurry of offseason departures including starter Dylan Cease, who signed for big money in Toronto. For San Diego to enjoy October baseball, the Padres will need a resurgent season from Jackson Merrill, Fernando Tatis Jr. to have his best year since his '22 PED suspension, and Joe Musgrove to be effective coming off Tommy John surgery.

The Diamondbacks missed the playoffs the last two seasons after reaching the World Series in 2023. Arizona brought back righthander Merrill Kelly after dealing him to the Rangers last July and landed third baseman Nolan Arenado in a trade with St. Louis. But its rotation still lacks the arms to compete.

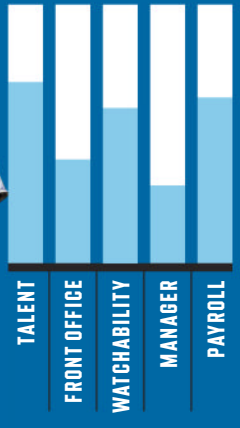
Then there are the Rockies. Colorado has posted three straight 100-loss seasons and yet somehow still has one of the weakest farm systems in baseball. The franchise is authoring one of the worst rebuilds in MLB history.

MARK J. REBILAS/IMAGN IMAGES

RAFAEL DEVERS

1 LOS ANGELES DODGERS

Projected Record 100–62



The Dodgers are the class of the league in just about every regard. The signings of Kyle Tucker and Edwin Díaz continue L.A.'s tradition of making big offseason moves (Yoshinobu Yamamoto, Shohei Ohtani, Freddie Freeman). Three-peat, anyone?

FREDDIE FREEMAN

2 SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

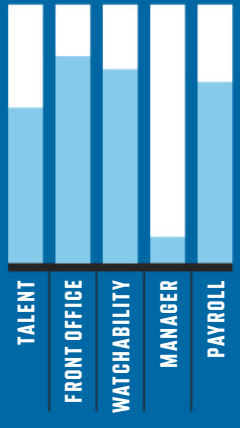
Projected Record 86–76

Giants exec Buster Posey dipped into the collegiate ranks to find his new manager, Tennessee's Tony Vitello. We'll soon find out if this was an inspired decision or if Vitello's total lack of major league experience shows. The talent to play in October is here.

LOGAN WEBB

3 SAN DIEGO PADRES

Projected Record 79–83

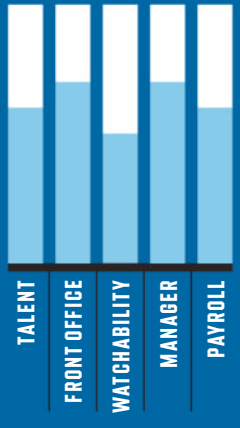


A.J. Preller is perhaps the majors' most aggressive executive, but his decade-plus in San Diego has netted one NLCS berth and a depleted farm system. Elevating ex-reliever Craig Stammen to the manager's desk may be Preller's most daring move yet.

FERNANDO TATIS JR.

4 ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS

Projected Record 77–85

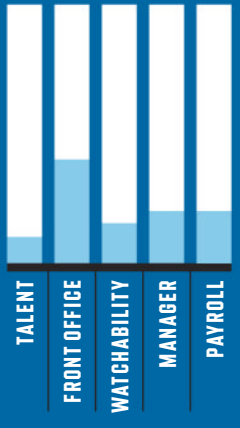


The Diamondbacks signed several late-career veterans, searching for the magic of 2023. But Arizona's roster doesn't look anywhere near pennant-worthy. Manager Torey Lovullo has just two playoff appearances in nine seasons.

KETEL MARTE

5 COLORADO ROCKIES

Projected Record 56–106



Hiring Paul DePodesta of *Moneyball* fame away from the Cleveland Browns is the most interesting thing the Rockies have done this decade. His way of thinking may be outdated, but he's at least refreshed the roster of this stagnant organization.

HUNTER GOODMAN

KEEPING UP *with the* DODGERS

FROM LEFT: EMILEE CHINN/GETTY IMAGES (TROPHY); ERICK W. RASCO; CARY EDMONDSON/IMAGN IMAGES; JONATHAN HUI/IMAGN IMAGES; JOE RONDONE/THE REPUBLIC/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES; ERIC HARTLINE/IMAGN IMAGES

SHUFFLE

photographs by

ERICK W. RASCO

HAPPY FEET

Last year Scheffler won his third and fourth career majors and topped the money list for the fourth straight year.

ING LONG

The Masters is just around the corner, which means the **2026 GOLF SEASON** is about to heat up. Can anyone slow Scottie Scheffler's roll? Has Rory McIlroy peaked? Our golf staff tells all

O.K., LET'S START OFF WITH A LITTLE "FACT OR FICTION." FIRST UP: RORY McILROY IS THE DEFENDING CHAMPION AT THE MASTERS, FINALLY. HAVING REMOVED THAT TWO-TON WEIGHT FROM HIS SHOULDERS LAST YEAR, HE WILL EVENTUALLY END HIS CAREER WITH MULTIPLE GREEN JACKETS.

BOB HARIG, SI Golf senior writer: Fiction Perhaps that burden-lifting victory frees him up to win more. It's certainly possible. But there are no guarantees, obviously, and McIlroy might be better suited by adding a different major or two, especially the British Open.

JEFF RITTER, SI Golf managing director: Fiction Oh, sure, he might win another one. Maybe even this year. So why bet against a generational future Hall of Famer? Because it took him so long to bag his first, because there are new stars blossoming every spring, and because of Father Time–McIlroy turns 37 in May, and his career peak is either already behind him or ending soon.

MAX SCHREIBER, SI Golf contributing writer: Fiction It's not a crazy take to say McIlroy will win at Augusta again. But after finally breaking through in 2025, the five-time major champion admitted he was struggling to find motivation. Surely he wants to claim another Masters, but it appears his career goals have shifted toward winning at other historic venues—the 2027 British Open at St. Andrews in particular.

JOHN SCHWARB, SI Golf senior editor: Fact Surprised I'm riding solo on this—I never thought McIlroy would get the first green jacket. But there's no reason to think in a few years, maybe even in his 40s, that he won't grab another just through course knowledge and guile. We've seen that before, no?

Augusta National was 7,555 yards on the scorecard for the 2025 Masters, and no one has won with a score worse than 10 under since 2017. It's time for Masters officials to add more length or make other significant changes to the hallowed grounds.

HARIG: Fiction Augusta National has already pushed the boundaries of what is rational. The club bought land behind Amen Corner so it could lengthen the 13th hole. The tee box at No. 11 is so far back you could get lost in the woods trying to find it. It purchased part of a road to extend the 5th hole. Enough is enough. Augusta might actually make a statement by adhering to the 2028 ball rollback [which will decrease distances by around 5%], which would be a mighty stand.

RITTER: Fiction Why bother? The Masters reliably delivers thrilling finishes, where players can make fast moves up the leaderboard or crash and burn. No course adjustments are necessary—it's already the exact kind of show Augusta aims for and golf fans devour.

SCHREIBER: Fiction In recent years, the course has been lengthened, but how much more can it take? Perhaps a more realistic way to combat golf's distance issue is the rollback of the ball. Maybe that'll eventually extend to equipment, too, but don't expect the return of persimmon drivers.

SCHWARB: Fiction As Bob said, Masters officials can do what no one else can, calling their own shots on a rolled-back tournament ball. I wouldn't mind seeing that plus an elimination of the "second cut," allowing errant shots to roll into trouble.

There has not been a first-time Masters participant to win since Fuzzy Zoeller in 1979, but that streak will not reach 50 years.

HARIG: Fiction There's a reason it hasn't happened. The pressure, the necessary course knowledge, the various nuances have all conspired to make rookie winners a rarity. Even Fuzzy needed help from Ed Sneed, who bogeyed the last three holes to fall into a sudden-death playoff.

RITTER: Fiction Chris Gotterup looks like a dangerous first-time participant, but course knowledge is clearly a huge factor. With so many wily veterans in the field each year, I'd bet against a rookie breakthrough anytime soon.

LIVING LARGE

DeChambeau, who had three top-10 finishes in last year's majors, is reportedly seeking half a billion dollars to re-up with LIV after this season.

Reebok
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(ROLLER) COASTING TO VICTORY

One year ago **RORY McILROY** *became the sixth golfer to join the sport's most revered group—career Grand Slam winners—with an invigorating and harrowing Sunday round at Augusta that was unlike any other*

IN THE aftermath of an exhilarating final day at the Masters last April, Rory McIlroy never had occasion to look in his golf bag until he traveled home. And when he finally did?

His 7-iron was missing.

"That's a pretty important club," he says. Indeed, it played a huge role in his victory, as he used it for a shot that will live in Masters lore: a sweeping hook around a tree from 208 yards on the 15th hole during the final round, which set up a birdie that tied him for the lead—again. In the 20 or so minutes preceding that shot, McIlroy, along with fans who agonizingly hoped for him to achieve his long-awaited career Grand Slam, passed through an emotional gantlet.

Before that shot on 15, he was teetering on the verge of a historic implosion. McIlroy, who began the day two shots ahead of Bryson DeChambeau, led by four shots when he teed off on Augusta's iconic par-5 13th. McIlroy laid up his second shot to 86 yards and then, fearing he might pull his shot left, dumped that basic wedge shot into the small creek fronting the green, leading to a double-bogey 7.

"I cannot believe he let it squirt out to the right. I don't care what he does. Chunk it onto the green," says Jack Nicklaus, the six-time Masters champion. "The ball is going to roll down to the hole, but you cannot do what he did. Pardon the expression, that's a brain fart."

On the morning of the first round, Nicklaus, now 86, had shared that he met with McIlroy prior to the tournament and they talked about his strategy leading up to the Masters. "I said, 'Rory, I know you prepared for Augusta, tell me how you're going to play the golf course,'" Nicklaus says. "We went through it shot for shot. He got done [talking about] the round, and I didn't open my mouth. I said, 'Well, I wouldn't change a thing.' That's exactly the way I would try to play the golf course."

Nicklaus chuckles at the idea of McIlroy deviating from his stated strategy at times during the final round while "he had the whole golfing world and mountains on his shoulders."

McIlroy didn't make that burden any easier when he bogeyed the 14th hole—missing a 6-footer—to fall a shot behind Justin Rose.

And then after he hit that great approach on 15, he missed the 6-footer for eagle but still walked away with a birdie. He had just nine feet after another great approach at the 16th but missed the birdie putt. On 17, he left himself a putt he couldn't miss after hitting an 8-iron approach to matter of inches to take a one-shot lead.

Now all McIlroy needed was a par at 18 for that elusive jacket, and after a perfect drive he had just a gap wedge left—and he dumped the shot into the right bunker. A blast to four feet left him that close to victory.

And he missed the putt.

During the final round McIlroy made two double bogeys, six birdies and three bogeys. On a day when 72 would have won, he shot 73. `"It was just a complete roller coaster of a day," he says. "There were points on the back nine when I thought, *Have I let this slip again?* But I responded with some clutch shots."

He delivered one more on 18 during the sudden-death playoff. Rose hit his approach to 15 feet. McIlroy countered with a wedge to less than four feet. Rose missed and dead silence ensued as, again, McIlroy had a short putt to win. Nobody believed it was a gimme, a collective holding of breaths commencing throughout the property.

Finally, the ball fell into the cup. McIlroy tossed his putter and dropped to his knees. "It was all relief," he says. "There wasn't much joy in that reaction. It was all relief.

SLAM FUNK

McIlroy went 11 years between major wins (with 21 top-10 finishes) before last year's victory at Augusta.

"And then, the joy came pretty soon after that. But that was—I've been coming [to the Masters] 17 years, and it was a decade-plus of emotion that came out of me there."

In 2011, McIlroy was just 21 when he held a four-shot, final-round Masters lead and then imploded over the back nine. He subsequently won four majors in the space of four years, putting him a green jacket shy of a career Grand Slam. When he finally broke through, it would be hard to fathom a Masters final round carrying more dread, more elation and, ultimately, more joy.

As for that missing 7-iron? Unbeknownst to McIlroy, his agent, Sean O'Flaherty, had plucked it from his bag amid all the celebration. He gave it to Augusta National for display in the clubhouse, a common tradition by Masters champions.

"If there was one I was going to give the club," McIlroy says, "it was probably that one." *—Bob Harig*

SCHREIBER: Fiction In the last four years, the hottest player in golf entering the Masters has gone on to win (Scheffler, Rahm, Scheffler, McIlroy). As of late February, that's Gotterup, who's made improvements with his ball striking, which is imperative in Augusta. However, when predicting if Zoeller's streak will be broken this year, it's a safer bet to say no.

SCHWARB: Fact Seeing Anthony Kim win in February [his first win in 16 years, which included a long hiatus from the sport] has me thinking that anything is possible and new, fearless players emerge every year. If you're giving me the next four Masters to cash this in, I'll take a shot. But can I have 40-to-1 odds, too?

Golf Channel commentator Brandel Chamblee stirred the pot in February by saying the Players Championship stood above the four majors and in fact is "the best major."

HARIG: Fiction The best one to me is always the one being played.

RITTER: Fiction Bob nailed it, there's nothing better than the major that's currently being played. Right now, in the midst of the Masters hype train, I can't wait to get to Augusta.

SCHREIBER: Neutral It depends on what you're into. The U.S. Open is a war of attrition. The Masters is for the shot-making artists. And the British Open requires creativity with the ball, too, in gnarly conditions; though, if the weather is benign, scores will be low. However, there's one thing most can agree on: The PGA Championship is a distant fourth.

SCHWARB: Fiction The U.S. Open can be the best golf tournament—at the right course, like an Oakmont or Shinnecock (this year), it's a delight to see who perseveres and who unravels. And it being a true open gives us wonderful storylines in the early rounds every year. But the Masters has become such a rite of spring in sports, with traditions and exclusivity that have reached mythical levels, that it stands alone if we're ranking 'em.

Jack Nicklaus, of course, is the all-time leader with six green jackets and Tiger Woods is next with five. Someone in this year's field will eventually join those two with at least five titles.

HARIG: Fact Why not Scottie Scheffler? In six Masters appearances, he has two wins and has never been worse than 19th. Without anywhere near his best stuff, he still finished fourth last year. It won't be easy winning three more green jackets, but he certainly seems capable of giving himself numerous opportunities over the next decade.

RITTER: Fiction Scheffler is the best—and perhaps only—candidate, since he's on top of the world and already has two jackets. He may one day get there, but I think Jack and Tiger are more likely to stand alone on the Masters' leaderboard for the next generation.

SCHREIBER: Fact Scheffler can do it. He only needs three more. He tends to play better on courses he's seen before, and, of course, the Masters is the lone major that's annually played at the same venue.

SCHWARB: Fact Like Bob said, it's about having plenty of at-bats remaining and Scheffler has one more Masters in his 20s and all of his 30s ahead. Nicklaus picked off two in his 30s and the improbable one at 46.

VAUGHN RIDLEY/SPORTSFILE/GETTY IMAGES

The Masters is famous for its inexpensive and simple concessions. The $1.50 pimento cheese sandwich is the one must-have when attending.

HARIG: Fiction To each his own, but that sandwich is borderline gross! I'll go with the egg salad every time.
RITTER: Fiction Pimento gets all the press, but savvy patrons know the classic chicken sandwich for $3 is the real star.
SCHREIBER: Fiction Considering I'm a Yankee from the New York area, I've never actually had it. One day, that'll change, and then I probably won't ever try it again.
SCHWARB: Fiction I'm not eating my mother's pimento cheese so, sorry, I'm not eating this version, either. I'll be alongside Jeff, eating more classic chicken sandwiches than you need to know about.

This year, LIV Golf players who finish in the top 10 of their events are receiving Official World Golf Ranking points, which will help unlock access to majors. The league also moved to a 72-hole format and added some new sponsors. On the other hand, it lost Patrick Reed and Brooks Koepka. But the league's entire future hangs on whether Bryson DeChambeau comes back in 2027.

HARIG: Fiction LIV Golf can go on for as long as the Public Investment Fund is willing to absorb massive losses. Yes, losing DeChambeau would hurt, but you can also argue that despite his huge popularity and amazing run of golf in the majors over the past three years, he's not moved the financial needle much for LIV Golf. That's what makes this situation fascinating. LIV doesn't want to lose Bryson. But if his asking price is anything near the large numbers being thrown around ($500 million), does LIV believe the investment is worth it?
RITTER: Fact Bob, you're half right: LIV will indeed last for as long as its investors are willing to continue. But if DeChambeau walks, it's over.
SCHREIBER: Fact With or without DeChambeau, LIV is already flailing. Lackluster television ratings. Over $1 billion in international losses. And its biggest offseason signings? Thomas Detry, Victor Perez, Elvis Smylie and reigning NCAA champion Michael La Sasso. If DeChambeau leaves, it'll be the nail in the coffin.
SCHWARB: Fact LIV Golf wouldn't fold up its luxury suites immediately if it lost DeChambeau, but the clock would start on the end. Because if Bryson goes, Jon Rahm would likely be next and there's no one else in the LIV stable right now that can carry the show.

All right, let's get to some predictions, starting with the upcoming Masters. Who wins and why?

HARIG: Scottie Scheffler He's on an Arnold Palmer-like every-even-year run (Arnie did it in 1958, '60, '62 and '64), and I like that trend continuing.
RITTER: Tommy Fleetwood The chalk says Scheffler, but I love everything about how Fleetwood has continued to thrive after breaking through for his first career PGA Tour title at the FedEx final last August.
SCHREIBER: Scheffler He's Scottie Scheffler. 'Nuff said.
SCHWARB: Scheffler I hate picking chalk but Scheffler is the exception like Tiger was a generation ago. Like it was back then, everyone else in the field now looks for Scottie on the leaderboard, and if he's above them, it's a sinking feeling.

How about the summer's other three majors? The PGA Championship is at Aronimink outside of Philly.

HARIG: Keegan Bradley He's won at Aronimink (the 2018 BMW) and perhaps by then he will have put that pain of the Ryder Cup behind him.
RITTER: Anthony Kim Bold? Definitely. Impossible? Hardly. As of this writing, Kim would need to make a big move up the Official World Golf Ranking to climb into the top 100 and auto-qualify. But the PGA also gives a few special exemptions each year, so they

BUILDING BLOCKS
Big things could be in store for Fleetwood (left), who finally won on tour in 2025, and Kim, whose February LIV win was his first pro title since '10.

JASON BUTLER/GETTY IMAGES

could dish an invitation Kim's way. And then? Game on. Raw tee-box power is not mandatory for success at Aronimink. Enter Kim, who relies on guile, swagger and a hot putter. Anything can generally happen at the PGA, and AK could turn this event upside down.
SCHREIBER: Chris Gotterup Aronimink is going to play long in the moist, spring Northeast. Gotterup can certainly bomb it, and if he keeps up his solid iron play, he can roll that into a major win less than two hours from where he grew up in New Jersey.
SCHWARB: Justin Rose The Englishman won a PGA Tour event at Aronimink in 2010 (AT&T National) and is playing the best golf of his life in his 40s. Rose nearly derailed Rory last year at Augusta, and he'll finally get his second major here.

O.K., the U.S Open is at Shinnecock. Who ya got?

HARIG: Jon Rahm He missed the cut at Shinnecock in 2018 but that was before Rahm was, well, Rahm. Since then he's been on a nice run at the U.S. Open, with four top-10s including his 2021 victory.
RITTER: Scheffler He's on career Grand Slam watch after winning the British last summer, and he'll quickly finish it off. Shinnecock will be set up on a knife's edge, and the winner will need to excel in all phases. Sounds like Scheffler's music.
SCHREIBER: Fleetwood It might seem obvious, because he finished as runner-up at Shinnecock in 2018, one stroke back of Brooks Koepka. But since breaking through at East Lake last August, Fleetwood seems to be in form.
SCHWARB: Scheffler The Grand Slam club had been closed for 25 years until Rory opened it back up, now just a year later another member will arrive. And Scheffler winning on his 30th birthday and Father's Day with son Bennett running out to greet him on the 18th green? Sign me up.

And the British Open, at Royal Birkdale?

HARIG: Fleetwood The Englishman now lives in Dubai, but Southport is his hometown and Royal Birkdale seems a good place for him to win his first major.
RITTER: Robert MacIntyre The big-hitting lefty is fearless and, most importantly, has become a more consistent and versatile player as he settles in. He flashed on Sunday in the U.S. Open last summer and had a strong Ryder Cup for Europe in the fall.
SCHREIBER: MacIntyre I echo Jeff here. In six British Open starts, the Scot has three top 10s, including last year. Plus, winning the Alfred Dunhill Links Championship at St. Andrews last October in blustery conditions proves he has what it takes to win a Claret Jug.
SCHWARB: Fleetwood A year after his first win, he'll take his first major in front of an adoring home crowd in Southport.

Give us one bold prediction. Something bordering ridiculous, but in an era of absurd golf headlines, one that still could happen in the year ahead.

HARIG: Kim wins a professional event Yes, it has already occurred. But nothing more ridiculous than that can happen the rest of the year.
RITTER: Patrick Reed wins the Masters I picked Fleetwood above, but golf's ultimate loner is now without a tour and back in f-you mode. Right in his comfort zone.
SCHREIBER: McIlroy doesn't win on the PGA Tour The hangover from his indelible, emotional 2025 will creep into this season.
SCHWARB: PGA Tour CEO Brian Rolapp lifts all Tour suspensions Near the end of 2026, having watched Koepka come back from LIV Golf and win a Tour event, Reed energize the previously moribund Presidents Cup and Kim win twice on the rival tour, the boss declares that anyone who played anytime on LIV is welcome back with open arms in 2027. □

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By
ZACH KOONS

COURTESY OF CADILLAC FORMULA 1 TEAM

A NEW TEAM IS JOINING THE FORMULA 1 GRID AS CADILLAC MAKES ITS DEBUT THIS SEASON. BUT THAT'S NOT THE ONLY CHANGE TO KEEP AN EYE ON IN THE CIRCUS OF CIRCUITS

TEST DRIVE
Cadillac is using a Ferrari engine in 2026 but plans to have its own power unit by '29.

BIG GAME HUNTING

In step with the team's focus on the U.S. audience, Cadillac went after fans by revealing its livery in an ad during Super Bowl LX.

COURTESY OF CADILLAC FORMULA 1 TEAM

THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY-SIX DAYS.

That's the amount of time the Cadillac Formula 1 Team was given between receiving formal approval to become the sport's 11th constructor in 2026 and lining up a car on the grid for the season's opening race at the Australian Grand Prix.

That accelerated timeline and 11th-hour uncertainty has defined the General Motors–backed entry into F1, even though the process began well before Cadillac emerged as the brand that would earn a spot in the highest class of racing. But utilizing that time remains the key for team principal Graeme Lowdon, who has been involved with the project since he took a phone call in his car in the spring of 2022, well over 1,000 days ago.

And every second is still precious.

"Sleep's an optional extra until Christmas," Lowdon says ahead of Cadillac's inaugural season.

The most important voices that Lowdon heard on the call belonged to former F1 world champion Mario Andretti

and his son Michael, co-owner of Andretti Global—the organization bidding to get a spot in the sport. Lowdon was meant to bring his expertise as one of the self-proclaimed "rare animals" who already had gone through the process of launching a new team, with Virgin Racing in 2010. On the call he did exactly that, advising the Andrettis and various investors on how the International Automobile Federation (FIA) process would work and what would need to be done in order to meet the rigorous guidelines.

At the end of the call came a message to Lowdon from Mario, the second and last American to win an F1 driver's championship, in 1978: "Don't let me down."

That would be just the beginning for Lowdon, who came aboard as an adviser. After the initial bid was met with resistance from both F1 and the sport's 10 established teams, Michael Andretti stepped down from his role at the forefront of the operation in late 2024. The decision cleared the way for General Motors, with its Cadillac brand, to take command of the bid, with TWG Motorsports CEO Dan Towriss at the helm.

Through it all, Lowdon remained steadfast in his commitment to getting a new team into the sport. After his previous attempt, which ended with Virgin going through numerous rebrands before ending up in severe debt and folding after the 2016 season, the 60-year-old has stayed around F1. "I'd like to think I've got the antibodies, in terms of a lot of the things that would normally be a surprise," he says.

And on Dec. 5, 2024, Lowdon was given another chance, as the team principal at Cadillac. Ninety-two days later, F1 approved the team's entry.

"One of the key reasons why we're here is that the investors had their belief in the project and invested at the right level, which was substantial, I hasten to add, with no guarantee of an entry," Lowdon says.

From there, Cadillac's official countdown clock began. But the work was already well underway.

F1 is no stranger to fluctuations in the number of teams that enter each season, with as many as 12 outfits competing as recently as 2012. But the grid has been rather stable for the past decade, with 10 constructors comprising the field since '17. There's no how-to manual for where a new team should begin.

"You can download all of the regulations off the internet, but there's nothing that indicates, *How do you enter as a new team?*" Lowdon says.

So Cadillac focused its efforts on a logical place to start: people. Lowdon and Towriss received 143,265 applications from those eager to get involved in building an F1 team from scratch. Cadillac short-listed 9,051 candidates and interviewed "somewhere in the region of 6,500," Lowdon says. At the end of 2025, the staff hovered at about 525 full-time employees, with a number of contractors and partners spread across three primary locations: the team's satellite facility in Silverstone, U.K., as well as U.S. hubs in Fishers, Ind., and Charlotte.

Of course, the team's most forward-facing employees will be behind the wheel. And Cadillac made sure to go after figures who would be familiar to F1 fans of the past decade: Valtteri Bottas and Sergio "Checo" Pérez. The two veterans bring a wealth of experience to the team, with a combined 26 years on the F1 circuit, 106 podium finishes and 16 race wins. Waiting in the wings is reserve driver Zhou Guanyu, who raced for three seasons alongside Bottas at Alfa Romeo and Sauber. His manager at the time? Lowdon.

SHIFTING GEARS
Both Pérez (above, left) and Bottas were without seats in 2025 before Lowdon (opposite) signed on the veteran drivers.

COURTESY OF CADILLAC FORMULA 1 TEAM

"WE'RE TRYING TO DO SOMETHING, NOT FIRST, BUT **WE'RE TRYING TO DO IT FAST AND TRYING TO DO IT BEST**," IQBAL SAYS.

"I feel like it's always a very special moment when you're with a team from the very beginning," says Zhou, who was born in Shanghai and moved to England when he was 12. "So you're building up together, the whole team, and in F1, performing together, which is very exciting."

While this may be the beginning for Cadillac, it's far from it for most involved. The Finnish-born Bottas ran as the No. 2 driver to seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton while at Mercedes until 2022, when he moved to Alfa Romeo (which later operated as Sauber). But he did not score a single point any of the 24 races in '24 and went back to Mercedes last season as a reserve driver. Pérez, the first Mexican driver to win a race in 50 years, similarly sat behind four-time champion Max Verstappen at Red Bull, supporting the team's constructors' championships in '22 and '23. After a difficult '24 season, however, Pérez was left without an opportunity to drive. Zhou served as the reserve driver at Ferrari last season following a similarly difficult tenure at Sauber. All three drivers had spent time with F1's elite, and yet going into 2026, were without a secure spot in the sport.

There was speculation that Cadillac would sign an American driver in an effort to appeal to fans looking to get behind the new team. IndyCar star Colton Herta did make the leap to become the team's test driver and race in Formula 2 with Cadillac's support, but he will still need significant time before he is ready to sit in one of the 22 most coveted seats in racing. There was little doubt in Lowdon's mind about the choices of Bottas and Pérez, and once the team got the first glimpse of its car at preseason testing in Barcelona, he was "completely convinced."

"Halfway through the Barcelona test, I was sat on the pit wall listening to comments that won't mean an awful lot to anybody listening in, but meant a lot to me, because there were the kind of comments that come from highly experienced drivers," Lowdon says. "They have a level of maturity, both when they're talking in technical terms, and also the way that they are prioritizing feedback, it's very clear that they have a lot of experience. And also the way that they are motivating and encouraging the teammates around them."

KYM ILLMAN/GETTY IMAGES

Though there may not be an American behind the wheel, the red, white and blue clearly runs deep in the DNA of what Cadillac is trying to achieve off the track. Marketing efforts have directly targeted a U.S. audience, following the sport's boom in the country since the start of the decade.

Those efforts culminated in a 30-second advertisement that aired during Super Bowl LX—another endeavor that came under a time crunch. Chief marketing officer Ahmed Iqbal says the spot, which unveiled Cadillac's inaugural livery, came together in less than 90 days. The ad connected to an in-person activation in the middle of Times Square in New York City, again in an attempt to emphasize the American roots of the team.

Most notably, though, the Super Bowl clip featured a snippet of John F. Kennedy's 1962 "We choose to go to the moon" speech, invoking the Apollo missions, which the

Cadillac operation seems to feel a certain kinship with. Iqbal calls the effort behind the ad, as well as the entire team, "a moonshot" driven by "American ingenuity and audacious ambition."

"We're trying to do something, not first, but we're trying to do it fast and we're trying to do it the best," Iqbal says. "It's one of those iconic American moments that I think got everyone together in this country to be like, 'Yeah, this is worth doing, it's worth going, it's worth trying to innovate and do this crazy thing that many think is not possible.'"

Fielding an F1 team certainly doesn't require the same calculations or logistics as landing an astronaut on the moon, but the collaborative effort across time zones and oceans has been immense. It's part of what Lowdon calls the "leap into the unknown" that Cadillac has taken. Yet the experience that comes from the staff surrounding the drivers helps limit the question marks.

Chief technical officer Nick Chester held a similar role at Renault. Former Alpine operations director Robert White is the team's chief operating officer. Consultant Pat Symonds was the chief technical officer at F1 from 2017 to '24 with stops at Renault, Marussia and Williams (again, a Lowdon connection) also on his résumé.

"We don't just have everyone starting from scratch," Zhou says. "We have experienced people, experienced knowledge, experienced engineers, which makes the difference because F1 is so complicated. You need to get everything right as a team. And that takes time."

Time. Something that Cadillac has been short on for the past year. And yet, two cars will pull out of the garage and onto the tracks at 24 different Grands Prix in 2026. When they do, there's no telling exactly how they'll fare.

STAPP AND GO
Though his 2025 season had a shaky start, Verstappen earned second place in the final standings with his win in Abu Dhabi (below).

JAMES SUTTON/FORMULA 1/GETTY IMAGES

As is customary every few seasons in the sport, the FIA introduced new technical regulations this winter that will reset the competitive balance of the field. There's no guarantee that McLaren, which dominated last season en route to Lando Norris's first world championship, will be atop the pecking order again.

For Cadillac, competing with recent powerhouses like Red Bull or Mercedes, or historic operations like Ferrari and McLaren, seems like an uphill battle. F1 isn't a sport where teams can inhibit the opposition, but rather "control the things that are within our scope and within our ability," Lowdon says.

Yet there's a new-kid-on-the-block sort of attitude within Cadillac. Hungry, and with an upstart mentality, those within the building have aspirations of shaking up the sport. To put it plainly, Cadillac F1 has nothing to lose.

"I think the best way to think of it is actually to put ourselves in the shoes of the opposition," Lowdon says. "There's not a team on that grid that hasn't been doing this for at least a decade, if not decades, and I'm pretty sure their shareholders would be somewhat upset if we just turn up and start beating their team. In fact, they may be more than upset, they would be apoplectic."

Cadillac's time to prove itself has been rapidly approaching and now that it's here, there's clearly no signs of slowing down. □

PIT STOPS

From regulation changes to uncertain futures for several drivers, these are the ***TOP STORYLINES FOR THE 2026 F1 SEASON***

New regs, skeptical reactions

▸ F1 introduced new regulations for 2026, replacing the drag-reduction system with "overtake" mode and increasing electrification in motors. But there are already skeptics. Among them is Max Verstappen, who blasted the cars, calling them "anti-racing." Charles Leclerc expressed concern that it may be "extremely difficult" to overtake without depleting batteries. If both drivers prove correct, the new season could get off to a rough start.

Verstappen's murky future

▸ An up-and-down season and inner turmoil at Red Bull in 2025 made many wonder: Could Verstappen leave the team he's spent his entire career with? The four-time world champ may have that very option after this upcoming season. The 28-year-old has threatened early retirement in the past and if the new regulations aren't to his liking, there's a possibility he could walk away for a year—or more.

Is Mercedes the team to beat?

▸ Since Lewis Hamilton's run of dominance came to an end on the final lap of the 2021 season, the Silver Arrows have wandered in the wilderness. But early indications suggest Mercedes got the jump on the field with its new engine—so much so that rivals have already called its legality into question. George Russell is now a bona fide veteran and if 19-year-old Kimi Antonelli can take a leap in his second season, Mercedes could be dangerous.

Ferrari, Hamilton bounce back

▸ The most historic team in F1 has gone nearly two decades without a championship. Plus, Hamilton is in the twilight of his career and his first year with Ferrari saw him finish a disappointing sixth. The team has been coy about its chances in 2026 but did debut an innovative, rotating rear wing during testing in Bahrain, a sign that it is willing to try anything to get back on top.

How McLaren enforces "papaya rules"

▸ Much was made about how the back-to-back constructors' champions handled prioritizing—or rather, *not* prioritizing—Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri in 2025. Ultimately, Norris won his first title and Piastri faded to third place, but McLaren's driver indecision let Verstappen back into the fray. Will Norris get the benefit of the doubt now that he's the reigning champ? Or will McLaren stick to a dicey status quo?

Familiar faces, very few different places

▸ The previous offseason was filled with so much driver movement that this past winter paled in comparison. Isack Hadjar is the only driver to move teams, from Racing Bulls to Red Bull. After being left out in 2025, multi-time race winners Sergio Pérez and Valtteri Bottas are the faces of Cadillac's inaugural season. And Arvid Lindblad, who replaced Hadjar, is the lone rookie in the field of 22. —Z.K.

POINT AFTER

GOLDEN GLOW

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICK W. RASCO

TEAM USA'S gold medal win over Canada at the Milan Cortina Games was a generational moment for American hockey. It was the U.S. men's first Olympic gold since 1980 and a rare win over their archrivals to the north. The U.S. women also won gold, also with an overtime victory over Canada, and the double championship made these Games the undisputed high point of American hockey history.

This gold may have lacked the David vs. Goliath vibes of the 1980 Miracle on Ice, but the emotional impact was just as intense. In their moment of victory, the U.S. men made their celebration a touching tribute to the memory of Johnny Gaudreau, who, along with his brother Matthew, was killed by an alleged drunk driver in August 2024. Gaudreau, an 11-year NHL veteran, is the U.S.'s all-time goals leader in international play and was a teammate of many on this Olympic squad. Minutes after Jack Hughes scored the OT winner against Canada, Auston Matthews, Zach Werenski and Matthew Tkachuk skated around the ice with Gaudreau's jersey *(inset)*. "He grew up with all these guys," Gaudreau's father, Guy, told SI's Pat Forde as he watched the celebration. "He's probably here with them now in spirit, right?"

Even in a moment of indescribable personal pain, Guy Gaudreau recognized the legacy that his son helped this team create. "The young kids are going to read about it, they're going to see the pictures," Guy says. "They're going to be so excited to get into the game. It's a great game." □

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